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PHYLLIDA BY FLORENCE MARRYAT.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

P H Y L L I D A.

A LIFE DRAMA.

BY

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ETC. ETC.

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I N T W O V O L U M E S.

VOL. II.

L E I P Z I G

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PHYLLIDA.

CHAPTER I.

ONCE more settled at Briarwood, with Phyllida for his daily companion, and surrounded by his home interests, Bernard Freshfield's private life left him nothing to desire, and his wife experienced (what few women do) the privilege of being a good and clever man's friend, without being compelled to be his echo. He left her absolutely free, body and soul, and no prisoner set at large ever valued his liberty more. The season, though far advanced in September, was still mild enough for out-door enjoyment, and to ramble through the plantations, followed by the dogs; or to take the lessons on horseback which her husband had commenced to give her; or to sit under the trees for a whole fore-

noon, happy and lazy, without being questioned as to the propriety of her actions, was perfect bliss to Phyllida. What thoughts passed through her yet girlish brain as she sat, silent and impassive, beneath the chestnut trees, Bernard never asked and never wished to know. He considered the soul of a woman to be as much her own property as the soul of a man, and that no one had a right to peer into its secrets except Him from whom it is impossible to hide them.

Yet he studied his young wife's character anxiously, if not officiously. Even during the short time they had been married, he had been obliged to confess to himself that she was a puzzle to him—for her nature seemed made up of two parts, and they were utterly opposed to one another. In company she was always somewhat reserved and silent. Mrs. Freshfield thought she was stupid and unused to society, and Laura trusted she was not of a cold or uncongenial disposition. Mrs. Freshfield's disappointment at her son's marriage to a girl of whom, as she said, "No one knew anything," was too recent to admit of her showing more than politeness to the

mistress of Briarwood; but Laura was nervously anxious, both for her brother's sake and her own, to make friends with her new sister. But the result was certainly unsatisfactory. The more the warm-hearted Laura poured her confidences into Phyllida's ear, and pressed for hers in return, the more did Bernard's wife seem to shrink within herself and became silent and abstracted. Her husband would have been as unhappy at this state of things as his sister, had he not known how differently Phyllida behaved when alone with him, and attributed it entirely to her shyness with strangers.

"Wait," he used to say to Laura, "till Phyllida has become as familiar with you as she is with me, and you will find that she is a perfect child in all her ways and manners."

And he had reason to say so, for when they were alone together no gay unthinking child could pass more rapidly from one phase of feeling to another. Sometimes she would be hilariously gay, and chatter and laugh by the hour. The wildest, most enchanting creature that ever held fast the senses of man!

When she was in this mood (which occurred by far the seldomer of the two) Phyllida would sing snatches of sportive little songs, with an archness and *abandon* that held her husband breathless with surprise and pleasure; or she would dance before him as naturally as a child dances to its mother on the nursery floor; or she would seize the nearest thing at hand, a shawl, a table napkin, a coloured scarf, and twist it about her head and shoulders, and transform herself to some one else, and under that guise act a dual part, keeping up an imaginary conversation, which evolved such sparkles of wit that Bernard, remembering her usual quiet demeanour, would be fairly startled, and wish that all Bluemere could come and admire her versatility as much as he did. At such times she appeared a perfect woman of the world, a little hard perhaps, but with the most consummate ease, and a thorough knowledge that she was charming. But her general demeanour (and it was always strikingly so after one of these outbursts) was so subdued as to be almost melancholy. Bernard would detect her in the act of heaving a sigh sometimes that seemed to

come from the very depths of her heart; and she would start and blush when accused of it, and turn it off with a merry declaration that it was all indigestion, and that if she continued to eat so much and do so little, she would soon be qualified to go round the country in a caravan as the "Fat Lady." And then she would jump up, declaring that in that case she must have some dancing dogs to accompany her, and let all the dogs loose, and make them dance with her upon the lawn and chase her through the shrubberies, whilst her husband watched her gambols with the purest pleasure. Only sometimes (much as he admired the languid far-away look in her lovely eyes) he wished that the dogs and flowers, and all the other innocent joys in which she revelled, had the power to chase it away, and leave her free to delight in them alone.

When, after the lapse of a few weeks, it became patent to Bluemere that Mrs. Bernard Freshfield had no intention of taking any part in the parochial work, the whole community felt aggrieved, and her mother-in-law made it the fruitful theme of many a discussion with her daughter Laura.

"If Bernard does not wish it, mamma," Laura would say, "I cannot see how Phyllida can possibly undertake it. Surely her duty to her husband is her first duty; and you know he always said he would not have his wife pottering about the labourers' cottages with a basket full of flannel and tracts. The parishioners of Bluemere have no cause to complain; they can have all their wants supplied and their troubles inquired into at Briarwood, and I believe they much prefer going up to Mrs. Garnett to having ladies visit them."

"Laura, it is useless of you to try and defend your sister-in-law's conduct. You speak as if she were a perfect child instead of a woman! Do you mean to tell me that she married my son without the slightest thought of the responsibilities of the position she undertook? A clergyman's wife to do nothing but ride on horseback, and drive about the country on the box-seat of her husband's curricule, and pay calls and receive them—why, it is perfectly iniquitous! And she dresses in a manner to which, I am sure, she must have been quite unaccustomed. Every one at Sir George Wynter's the other night

was staring at her white *moiré* and the costly lace with which it was trimmed—pearls round her throat, too! That foolish boy is spending all his substance on her, and for a person of whom one knows *absolutely nothing!* It is no wonder people stare at the exhibition of so much folly.”

“Say rather, mamma, they stare at so much beauty! Phyllida is the prettiest woman that has been seen in this part of the country in my remembrance, and I don’t wonder poor Bernie is half off his head about her. I heard people saying at Sir George Wynter’s that she was a perfect picture; and I think, mamma, that you ought to be very proud of your daughter-in-law.”

“Well, well,” replied Mrs. Freshfield, but half-mollified, “her beauty should not prevent her doing her duty, and I think Bernard is much to blame not to insist upon it. He lays everything on Miss Warren’s shoulders in a manner that few young ladies would bear so quietly. That poor girl positively attends to everything, from the Dorcas society and the mothers’ meetings to the school prizes and the harvest festival. It is most unfair that

Bernard's wife should not share her labours, and I think she would be quite justified in resigning her post."

"Oh come, mamma," cried Laura, laughing, "don't make a grievance out of that, for you know that Annie Warren undertook the parish work entirely of her own accord, and Bernie would like nothing better than to see his way to relieve her of it. He says she is the greatest plague he has, and makes more mischief in the village than he has time to undo. Miss Warren would probably consider herself very much injured if Phyllida were to enter one of the cottages without her leave."

But in this surmise Laura Freshfield happened to be mistaken. Strange to say, Miss Warren was as anxious now that Phyllida should share the burden of her parochial work, as she had been before to prevent her doing so. Her hopes of becoming the mistress of Briarwood being unmistakably blighted, she did not see the advantage of toiling for the remainder of her life in the service of the parson. And it maddened her as she went her daily rounds with a heavy basket on her arm, and

a thousand annoyances to beset her way, to think of the girl she had so looked down upon as Mrs. Pinner's cousin taking her ease at Briarwood, clad in the costly robes her husband purchased for her, or visiting the best houses in the county, and being declared the belle wherever she appeared. So she was very much bent on letting Bernard know, in a perfectly amicable manner, that if his wife did not intend to take her share of the parochial duties, he must find some one that would. Consequently, as he sat at breakfast one morning with Phyllida in a cashmere and satin quilted dressing-gown in a chair very near his own, Miss Warren, with the inevitable basket on one arm and a large roll of brown paper under the other, walked into the room unceremoniously and opened fire with an exclamation of surprise.

"At breakfast, at half-past ten in the morning! What a shocking waste of time! Why, I hardly thought I should find you at home, Mr. Freshfield! Isn't this the day that was fixed for distributing the garden seeds to the men at Brick Common?"

"I believe it is," replied Bernard, crossing his

legs and unfolding a newspaper. "Robinson has gone over there, I suppose? I told him to see to it for me."

"Dear me! I made sure you would distribute the seeds yourself. The cottagers will be very much disappointed, and I don't think Mr. Robinson knows anything about the matter."

"He must find out, then," said Freshfield curtly; and then wishing to make amends, he addressed his wife. "Phyllida, are you not going to ask Miss Warren to take a cup of coffee?"

Phyllida blushed, and moved towards the tea equipage.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Warren. Which do you prefer, tea or coffee?"

"Thank you, I will take coffee," replied the unwelcome visitor, depositing her load on the floor and drawing a chair to the table, "I have been so busy all the morning, I have hardly had time to think of breakfast. *My* work would never be done if I lay in bed after six o'clock. No one knows the cares of a parish, except those who undertake them, and I really have more on my hands than I

can well accomplish. It will be impossible to go on in this way much longer without help."

"Let me know what part of it you consider too onerous, and I will relieve you of it at once, Miss Warren," exclaimed Bernard. "I have the names of half-a-dozen ladies on my list who have asked me to give them some work to do in Bluemere, and are only waiting to pick up the crumbs your busy hands let fall."

But this was not what Miss Warren was striving for. She wanted to see Phyllida (who, she believed, would hate such work) forced or shamed into doing it.

"Naturally, Mr. Freshfield, all who call themselves Christians, or wish the world to think them so, must desire to labour in the vineyard. It should be a privilege, and with right-minded persons it is so. And therefore I have been waiting to learn what share of the duty your wife intends to take upon herself, before we discuss the propriety of letting others usurp her right of choice. Of course Mrs. Bernard *does* intend to become a visitor amongst her husband's people. It would be a noticeable

fact if she did not," concluded Miss Annie, with a hard stare at Phyllida, who began stammering,—

"I will—will—do anything that Bernard wishes me to do—but—but—"

"*But*," said Freshfield, wheeling round his chair, so as to face Miss Warren, "I do not wish my wife to meddle in the parish affairs at all; more, I do not intend that she shall do so. She has not been used to such work, and she doesn't like it, and I have plenty of assistance without hers. If the ladies of Bluemere find it irksome, Robinson will take it off their hands, and if it becomes too much for him I will get a second curate. So you see, Miss Warren, I have provided against all contingencies, and intend Mrs. Freshfield to stick to her own business, which is to look after me."

"Oh, of course if that is your decision, Mr. Freshfield, there is no more to be said on the subject," replied Miss Warren tartly. "It is very unusual, and it will excite some discussion, but I dare say Mrs. Bernard will not mind that. But a rector's wife is a very noticeable person, and the parish expect more of her perhaps than of others. This

morning, for example, I quite thought I should secure Mrs. Bernard's co-operation in covering the school-books. I have the paper with me, you see, and was on my way to the school-room, when I looked in here. Indeed, I half promised the teachers that your wife would inspect the premises to-day, and know they will be prepared to see her. It seems so strange that she should have returned home nearly a month, and not even been over the school-rooms or alms-houses yet."

"Well, she is not going over them, certainly not as a duty, neither can she cover old school-books, Miss Warren. Indeed, she is bound not to leave home this morning, as we expect the Ashleighs to lunch. If, when Phyllida is better acquainted with Bluemere and its people, she likes to visit their cottages from a feeling of friendliness, I shall be the last person to wish to deprive my parishioners of what is such a pleasure to myself; but it is no duty of hers to do so, and I will not have her think it."

"Well, I suppose I had better ask Miss Masters or Mrs. Sedgewood to help me," replied Miss Warren, with an air of martyrdom; "for no one could be ex-

pected to put fresh covers on three hundred books in a morning with one pair of hands."

"Please leave them altogether," said Bernard, "and I will see they are covered without laying myself under an obligation to anyone."

"Oh dear, no, Mr. Freshfield! What I undertake I will do, even if I die under it. No one shall ever have it in their power to say that *I* shirked any part of the duty that falls to my share as a labourer in the Lord's vineyard."

Bernard was afraid he might be tempted to say something rude, and thought it best to change the conversation.

"Give me another cup of tea, darling," he said, addressing his wife; and then, just as she was handing it to him, he added, "I have had such a nice letter this morning—I must read it to you by-and-by—from a very old friend of mine, now in America—Nelson Cole!"

Something must have startled Phyllida at that moment, or the evil eye of Annie Warren was fixed upon her, and made her hand unsteady; for down went the cup and saucer with a crash, deluging the

table-cloth with hot tea, and when Bernard looked up at the unexpected clatter, he was horrified to see that his wife had sunk back in the nearest chair, and was staring at him with wide-open, frightened eyes. He sprang to her side in alarm.

"Phyllida, Phyllida, my darling! What is the matter? She is ill—she is fainting! Please open the window, Miss Warren, and give me a glass of water from the side-board. Thank you. She will be better now. What can have been the cause of this sudden attack?"

"I don't think Mrs. Bernard is *ill*," remarked Miss Warren, with quiet malice. "I was watching her face all the time, and I imagine it was something *you* said that upset her nerves."

Phyllida turned her head and looked at the speaker. Their eyes met, and from that moment the two women knew that they were enemies.

"It is untrue," she answered slowly, but her voice faltered as she spoke. "I *am* ill—faint. I don't know what is the matter with me, but it is nothing that you said, Bernard."

"I don't see how it *could* be," he remarked in-

genuously. "I was only speaking of my friend's letter. Miss Warren's visions of parish work are much more likely to have upset you, Phyllida."

"In which case, perhaps, I had better take my leave?" said Miss Warren, "though I can scarcely accept the blame you would like to impute to me, Mr. Freshfield. Your wife's constitution must indeed be delicate if she cannot even bear the mention of her duty. Our dear lost Alice, frail as she was, had a soul which could at all times take an interest in the wants of others. Dear saint! Were she but on earth, she would be the first to lighten me of my heavy burthen. But those days are over. Shall I send Mrs. Garnett in to attend to Mrs. Bernard?"

"No, thank you, Miss Warren. I can do all that she requires for her. Good morning. If Phyllida is quite recovered I shall ride over to Brick Common this afternoon, and hear what the men have to say about their plots of ground."

As soon as they found themselves alone, Bernard poured out his whole wealth of tenderness upon his wife, and implored her to confide to him the cause of her sudden fright or illness. But the girl was

resolute in evading his questions. It was the weather—the change of season—she was over tired—she had not slept well the night before—it was everything or nothing. It was anything, in fact, but the effect of what she had heard or seen.

“And I am so sorry I interrupted you,” continued Phyllida in a low voice that still trembled, “because you were going to tell me something about—about—a friend of yours—in—in—America, and I want to hear all—all—you can tell me of him, Bernard,” she said, with white lips.

“I will read you his letter, my darling, or you shall read it for yourself—if you would like it better. He is a dear old fellow, but rather a rough diamond, not a lady’s man by any manner of means; but we have always been the best of friends and companions, notwithstanding the difference in our ages; for I suppose Cole must be fifty by this time. He was very kind to me when I was a youngster, and though he has been in the United States for the last five years, we keep up a steady correspondence, though not a very constant one. And he writes so kindly, too. I believe he really cares for me.”

Phyllida came and seated herself on her husband's lap, and clasped her trembling arms round his neck.

"And is this friend of yours—this Mr. Cole," she asked, "going to live all his life in Chicago?"

"In *Chicago*, dearest! What put that in your head?" said Bernard, with a look of surprise.

"Didn't you say he was out there?"

"No; I don't think I mentioned any place in particular, but he *has* been in Chicago several times, notwithstanding. He has been employed on the railway there. He is a civil engineer. You will laugh when you read his letter, Phyllida. He 'chaffs' me so for saying I shall never marry again. But that was six months ago, you know, before I met you, my darling! What *will* he say when he hears my resolution is broken? I shall never hear the last of it."

"Don't tell him, Bernard. It can be of no consequence to him, and I should not like to be laughed at, if I were you."

"Oh, I don't mind his fun, it is all good-natured. And I could not keep such an important piece of

news from old Cole. How do you suppose I could write a letter without mentioning you, when I think of nothing else?"

"You will be telling him the colour of my hair and eyes, and all that nonsense," said Phyllida wistfully, "so that he may know exactly what I am like."

"I might try, darling, but I should never succeed. How do you suppose I could put such a dainty little witch on paper? The best part of you is what can never be described. But I shall certainly make an attempt to let my old friend know what a pretty young woman Mrs. Bernard Freshfield is."

"Perhaps,"—said his wife slowly, and as if she spoke with a great effort—"perhaps Mr. Cole will be coming to England soon, and able to judge for himself."

"No; he won't, you conceited girl—worse luck. I wish he were; but he says there is no chance of his return. The fact is, his services are too valuable, and they won't let him leave the States. I expect he will remain there now for the rest of his days."

Phyllida heaved a sigh—was it of relief?—and rose demurely from her seat.

“I will go upstairs now,” she said, “and keep quiet until the Ashleighs come,” and her husband saw no more of her that morning.

Her spirits appeared so depressed, however, after this conversation, and experienced so little relief from the bursts of gaiety in which she had hitherto indulged, that Bernard became quite anxious on her account, and began to have all sorts of fanciful ideas on the subject of the change. At one time he declared Bluemere could not agree with her. At another that she had not sufficient excitement, or that she had too much fatigue and the entertaining of company at Briarwood exhausted her strength, until every old woman in the parish was laughing at the parson’s “fads” about his pretty wife. Phyllida herself was the last person to encourage his alarm. She smiled serenely whenever it became patent to her, and tried hard to force a hilarity she did not feel in order to allay it, but her efforts were too obvious to have the desired effect, and Bernard watched her every look and movement with the

greatest concern. At last her mood changed, apparently as unreasonably as it had arisen, but whether causeless or not, sunshine burst forth again at Briarwood, and seemed destined to illuminate it for ever more. It was as if some heavy oppression had suddenly been lifted off Phyllida's mind, or some dark cloud cleared from her brain; and she commenced to dance along the path of life like a child that had but just awakened to the reality and joy of existence.

Bernard could not account for the happy change, but he kept the day as a red letter one in the calendar of his memory. It was on an afternoon in October, one of those days we sometimes get at the close of the year, that are more precious than any in summer, when the whole land is made glorious by a sun whose rays enliven without scorching us, and the rich autumn foliage beautifies the country with one mass of colour. Bernard had some important parish work to look after, and Phyllida had set forth alone in her little pony chaise, which she had learned to manage admirably, to pay a call upon the Ashleighs. She had become a favourite with most of the families

round about Bluemere, and especially with the one in question. Captain Ashleigh, who was an old naval officer, could never sufficiently praise the beauty and amiability of the rector's wife, and Mrs. Ashleigh thought her one of the sweetest girls of her acquaintance. So that Bernard was glad she should go and spend the morning with them, hoping their society might have the effect of raising her spirits. His own business kept him from home till late in the afternoon, and as he walked up the drive, on his return to Briarwood, he saw Phyllida waiting in the porch to receive him. But could this be the pale, listless girl he had parted from in the morning? Bernard looked at her in astonishment. Her cheeks were like a damask rose; smiles dimpled on her face and shone out from her eyes; her little feet danced with impatience whilst she waited his approach. Her husband quickened his steps in glad surprise.

"Why, my darling, what is this?" he exclaimed. "Who has been working miracles in my absence? Have you met an old friend or made a new one? Or is Captain Ashleigh a necromancer, and has he been giving you a dose of the elixir of life?"

"Yes, yes, Bernie," she cried, laughing, and clapping her hands, "that is it. I found an old bottle amongst the captain's dusty books, and drank its contents before I knew what it was. And you see what it has done for me. I am quite well again now, and mean to live for ever."

"Seriously, I hardly know you," said Bernard, as he came up to her; "my darling, you look lovelier than ever. I am so glad you enjoy riding and driving, and that it agrees with you. You are not the same girl I put into the pony chaise this morning."

"No, dearest, I am not the same girl," she exclaimed, as she pressed against her husband's side and clung to him. "I feel as if all the world was changed for me, and I should never feel unhappy or depressed again. Oh, how wicked I have been to give way to such feelings, and when I had you—*you*, for all my own!"

"It was illness, my Phyllida, that made you so melancholy. How could you help it?" said Bernard tenderly; "but I cannot tell you how thankful I am for your recovery. What did the Ashleighs say,

love? Did they not remark upon these sparkling eyes and glowing cheeks and happy smiles?"

"Bernard, dear, I never saw them. They had gone out for the day to Westertown."

"Never saw them, child! What have you been doing, then, all this time?"

"Not much; I think, resting myself, and dreaming and feeling—oh, so happy! When I arrived at the Ashleighs, Bernard, the old butler, asked me to walk in; he thought "Master Edward," as he calls him, was about the grounds. So as I was rather tired, I went into the library, and there—"

"What did you do there, Phyllida?"

"Oh, nothing—nothing in particular, only read the captain's newspapers, and—"

"Ah, he is a rare old fellow for newspapers, I know, and takes them in from all parts of the world."

"Yes, yes, Bernard," interrupted his wife excitedly, "and they are very interesting, and so I sat reading them, and—and—oh, I am so glad to be back again with you," she cried disconnectedly, as she flung herself into his arms—"back again here

in my dear, *dear* home, safe and well with you. For as I sat in that library, Bernard, a sudden fright seized me, and I thought, supposing—supposing—something were to happen to you whilst I was away, and I should never see you more—or die before we met again—and as the thought struck me, I rushed out to my pony chaise and jumped in, and drove home as fast as ever I could. But you had not returned—and it has seemed hours—weeks—centuries, since I waited for you here! Oh, if anything *had* happened to prevent our meeting, it would have been too, *too* terrible—and just now!”

“My dearest girl,” said Bernard, “you are still too much excited for health. Try and calm yourself, Phyllida. To think that you should love me like this is the purest pleasure I could experience; but you must not give way to idle fears. God is above us all, remember, and my life and yours are always safe in His hands.”

“Oh yes, Bernie, and I will never be so foolish again—never! I am all right now, indeed I am—and so—*so* happy, you cannot think.”

She gazed into his face with her sparkling eyes

as she spoke, and he thought he had never seen her look so beautiful. There was perfect peace and contentment at Briarwood that day, and for many months afterwards, and Bernard never thought to inquire more closely into the reason of so unaccountable a change in the demeanour of his wife. That it *had* changed was all he cared for. Neither did it seem likely to distress him again. From the period of her visit to the Ashleighs' library, a calm happiness settled down upon the young mistress of the rectory, and she was an altered being. The feverish bursts of gaiety with which she used to startle her husband entirely disappeared; but they were succeeded by an equable cheerfulness that was far better suited to domestic life.

She now sought the society of Laura Freshfield as eagerly as once she had repulsed it, and responded with so much warmth to her overtures of affection, that the sisters-in-law became devoted friends. This happy result was followed by a participation in all Laura's pursuits, either in the parish or out of it, and before long it was no unusual occurrence for Bernard, on entering the house of a sick parishioner,

to find his wife sitting by the bedside and beguiling the tedious hours with her reading or conversation.

The "parson's bonnie lady" was soon as much loved in Bluemere as himself, and every day her husband's heart seemed to twine its tendrils faster and closer round her own.

Meanwhile, there was no more devoted wife in the country than Phyllida.

Her love for Bernard was so mixed with reverence and gratitude that she seemed never to be able to do enough to express it to him. She loved him more with the affection a dog bears to its master, than the wives of the present century think it dignified to display. There was none of the overweening pride of power in Phyllida's manner, although she could govern her husband by the lifting of her little finger. On the contrary, she was humble and low-minded in the extreme. She would watch his face to see if she could read his thoughts before he spoke them, and run to fetch and carry for him like a little dog, taking a delight in forestalling the servants, and even his own wishes.

Bernard would reprove her lovingly for such un-

dignified behaviour, but she did not alter it. To wait on him, to obey his slightest word, and to accompany him wherever he would take her, seemed to fill up the measure of her existence.

Of course her conduct could not be unnoticed at Blue Mount, and even Mrs. Freshfield was compelled to remark that although she "was afraid poor Phyllida did not come of very good blood, there was no doubt she made Bernard happy, and that was, after all, the main thing."

"But that is not all, mamma," Laura would reply indignantly. "Phyllida does almost as much good in the parish as Bernie himself. I don't mean to say she carries about a basket like that detestable Annie Warren; and why should she, when she has plenty of people to carry it for her? But she takes care that no comfort for the sick shall ever be wanting from Briarwood, and she goes and sees them, and talks to them; oh, in such a nice way, just as if they were her equals! The poor people about here perfectly adore Phyllida, mamma. They say she is a 'real lady, without any pride in her;' and call her the '*parson's bonnie wife*,' and the

'*parson's angel*,' and all kinds of pretty names. And the scarlet fever is very bad over at Brick Common now, you know—the Tanners lost two of their little ones last week—and Miss Warren has left off visiting there, but Phyllida goes all the same, and she sat up a whole night with poor Mrs. Tanner when she was in such distress. And Bernie, although he is very nervous about her, won't tell her not to go, because he says she is one of God's angels, and under His especial care. Isn't that nice?"

Mrs. Freshfield's answer was somewhat cautious.

"Well, of course, my dear, it is very good of your sister-in-law to try and comfort the poor creatures, and if your brother does not forbid her to do so, no one else has the right to interfere. Still, I think Phyllida might have some consideration for *you* and others of her friends, to whom she is very likely to bring home the infection."

Laura glanced at her mother somewhat contemptuously. Was this the fruit of the religion upon which Mrs. Freshfield had moulded her life for the last sixty years,—to tremble at the proximity of a pestilence that, at the worst, according to her

own creed, could only throw open the gates of that heaven which she believed she should walk straight into? The girl, with all her young life before her, had no such fear!

"You needn't be afraid for *me*, mamma," she answered; "but if you think there is any chance of *your* catching it, I will go to Briarwood and stay there until the danger of infection is past."

But Mrs. Freshfield, whatever her private opinion, could never have consented to let the public know that she was not ready for glory, and so Laura and Phyllida worked on together, heart and soul, and spared neither time nor trouble till the fever had abated, and the little ones were running about Brick Common again in their usual health.

CHAPTER II.

MRS. PINNER had a grievance—a daily and hourly grievance—and I regret to add that it was a worldly one, full of envy, malice, and all uncharitableness. Bernard and Phyllida had asked her sister, Mrs. Penfold, to spend Christmas at Briar-

wood, and Mrs. Penfold had accepted the invitation. Mrs. Penfold had actually left Captain Barclay and Miss Annadale to the tender mercies of Sarah, and such assistance as was considered necessary, and come to play at being a fine lady in Bluemere. To Mrs. Pinner, who had never been invited to do more than dine at the rectory, the thought of her sister Maria living in the very bosom of Bernard Freshfield's family, and located in the best bed-room, with amber hangings, was gall and wormwood, and all the more so because she dared not confide her jealousy to anyone but herself.

Her whole comfort consisted in reading the "Seventh Vial," and shaking her head over the delightful conviction that when it was opened she should be able to hear from her throne of gold, even above the twanging of her harp-strings, the frizzling made by her sister Maria as she was tossed like a pancake from one infuriated demon to another in the nethermost hell.

"To think," she said to herself, "that Maria, who was ever one of the worldly-minded, leaning to all sorts of gaiety and carnal pleasures, should be

living at Briarwood and driving all over the country in a carriage and pair, with that stuck-up Phyllida by her side; whilst, if they ask *me* to dinner, they don't even send the pony chaise to fetch me. The poor minister must indeed have been led astray from his duty by that girl before he would have dreamt of setting up my sister Maria over one of the elect. And to see the gown she wore to church last Sunday, too! Black silk at ten shillings the yard, if it cost a penny. The woman must be robbing her employers to be able to pay for such luxuries. I am greatly afraid her feet are already set upon the broad path. And the way in which Phyllida and she spoke of those disreputable lodgings at Gatehead before all the servants, perfectly shocked me! What respect can they entertain for their minister after hearing such a confession? I thought I should have swooned. I must ask Maria to spend a quiet evening with me, and talk to her about such things. After all the trouble I have taken to live amongst these people as my father's daughter, and one of the Lord's chosen should live, to have a sister who lets lodgings come and sit

down at my very door, is *too* trying! I must entreat her, if she has no respect for herself, at least to have some for me."

Meanwhile Mrs. Penfold (who was not yet aware of the feelings to which her advent had given birth in Mrs. Pinner's breast) was enjoying herself, as she had not done for years past, beneath the hospitable roof of Briarwood.

Bernard Freshfield had not forgotten the kind part which his wife's cousin played at the time of their marriage, and there was no false shame in his manly nature to mar the pleasure with which he repaid it.

Had Mrs. Penfold been a duchess she could not have been waited on and served more assiduously than she was at Briarwood; and Bernard would have had her take up her residence there altogether and make it her home, had she not been too independent to accept his offer.

"Your husband is an angel, my dear," she said to Phyllida, "and you are the very luckiest girl I ever heard of; but I couldn't be happy eating another person's bread whilst I have two hands of my own

to earn it with. And what would the captain say if he heard I was going to desert him for good? Why, it was with the greatest difficulty I could get his leave to come here at all. I was quite a fortnight coaxing it out of him. And poor Miss Annadale cried when I left Gatehead, Phyllida—actually *cried*; but she is not quite right in her head, you know, my dear, so it is excusable on her part. And I should have been truly sorry to miss seeing you in your happiness. What a good, dear husband you have, child, and what an elegant home! You are indeed a fortunate creature. And the cloud you once spoke to me of at Gatehead, Phyllida—that depressing, uncomfortable feeling that I told you was so unnatural—it has all passed away now of course, my dear, and you are quite happy and contented,” concluded Mrs. Penfold somewhat curiously.

Phyllida flushed deeply, and for a moment did not answer. Then she said slowly,—

“Yes, cousin Penfold, I am *very* happy, and *very* contented—sometimes I think I am too happy for it to last—and always that I am far happier than I

deserve. And if the old depressing thoughts return at times to damp my pleasure, I put them away, and hope I am right in doing so. For they could only make my husband anxious about me; and you told me, didn't you, that it was my *duty* to bury all the past and begin a new and better life for the future?"

"I did indeed, my dear, and I meant it. You have many more luxuries and blessings than most people, and all you have to do is to let your heart overflow with thankfulness, and make dear Mr. Freshfield as perfectly happy as you can. It would be a sin to rake up old memories that can do no good, and only infuse bitter into the cup which Heaven has been good enough to fill for you."

"Yes, that is what I thought," said Phyllida, with a sigh of relief.

"I am going to ask you if you will spare me for this evening," continued Mrs. Penfold. "My sister Charlotte has written to ask me to take tea with her, and I don't like to refuse, as it is some time since we have been alone together, and she mustn't think I've grown proud because I'm visiting at Briarwood."

“No: she shall not do that!” replied Phyllida, laughing; “and so I will send you down in my little pony chaise, cousin Penfold, and you can order it to fetch you again at any time you like.”

So at six o'clock that evening the pony chaise deposited Mrs. Penfold at the door of Mrs. Pinner, who received her in a purple merino gown, with a pink ribbon at her throat, and artificial roses in her cap; yet looked, nevertheless, with righteous sorrow at the plain but rich dress worn by her sister, and which was one of the numerous presents showered upon her by her young relations.

“I am pleased to receive you in my humble abode, Maria,” commenced Mrs. Pinner solemnly, “for I almost feared that the attention you have been receiving at Briarwood would make you despise the hospitality of one who has little to offer you beside the divine food, which is provided for all those who earnestly hunger after it.”

“Well, I don't know why you should say that, Charlotte,” replied Mrs. Penfold briskly, as she laid aside her out-door garments. “I have never refused an invitation of yours yet, that I am aware of; but

it is not many that you have extended to me since I lived at Gatehead. I supposed you were ashamed of me because I let lodgings?"

"I cannot say that I consider letting lodgings a fit occupation for one of our father's daughters—the daughters of a minister of the gospel."

"Yes, a dissenting minister, elected by his own sect, who held his services in a barn," replied Mrs. Penfold; "but father was a shoemaker before he turned preacher. I suppose you haven't forgotten *that*, sister Charlotte."

"I have not forgotten what is due to myself," said Mrs. Pinner, bridling; "and it surprises me, Maria, to hear you allude to poor father's misfortunes in that heartless manner! It is the same thing with your own calling—you speak as openly of your lodgers and your lodgings, as a duchess would mention her country seat. I *do* wish you would have a little consideration for what *I* must suffer in the eyes of my friends by such a confession."

"Well, I am sorry if I have hurt your feelings, Charlotte, but your friends can't be worth much if the fact of my poverty makes any difference to them.

Mr. Freshfield and Phyllida are not ashamed of it, as you may plainly see."

"Oh! the poor minister," said Mrs. Pinner, tossing her head, "is completely led by what his wife says; and as for Phyllida, I daresay she has her own reasons for keeping on good terms with you. She has not forgotten, doubtless, that, but for your assistance, she would never have been married at all."

"I don't know why you should say so, Charlotte. *I* had no hand in the matter, except in accompanying them to the church. The young people had made up their minds long before they saw me."

"Mr. Freshfield does not seem to be of your opinion, Maria. He told me the other day he owed his wife to you. And he tries to pay off the debt by making you handsome presents if I am not much mistaken," said Mrs. Pinner, with a spiteful glance at her sister's silk dress.

"Yes, indeed, he is most generous and kind to me," returned Mrs. Penfold, "although I hope he does not consider that he owes me anything. He has given me four or five most handsome dresses (this is one of them, Charlotte; just feel this silk—it

must have cost a lot of money) and a fur-lined cloak for the winter, and one of the most complete writing-tables you ever saw—just the very thing I wanted, and fits into my recess as if it had been made for it. Indeed, he has been good enough to propose that I should take up my residence altogether at Briarwood and relieve Phyllida of the troubles of housekeeping; but that is an offer I could not accept.”

“The minister seems to have a deep sense of the obligation you have put him under,” remarked Mrs. Pinner sarcastically, “and it is a very handsome return for just going to church with them. I suppose the marriage was all right and regular?”

“Why, bless my soul! Charlotte, what a question to put about our own cousin. Of course it was. I saw the licence myself; and as I am one of Phyllida’s nearest relations in England, I had a perfect right (the minister told me) to give her away.”

“Well, there was no one to object to it if you hadn’t. I suppose the girl *has* relations in St. Domingo, since her parents lived there, but she never received a letter while she stayed with me, which I thought rather peculiar. Has she ever

mentioned anyone to you, either on the father's or the mother's side? because you may remember Agnes Summers' people settled in the West Indies too."

"No, she never has; and now you mention the circumstance, it *is* peculiar," replied Mrs. Penfold meditatively.

Now Mrs. Pinner, notwithstanding she professed to know all about Phyllida to the Bluemere people, and plumed herself considerably on the fact of her being the rector's wife, was in reality excessively curious to find out something more about her cousin's antecedents, and it was chiefly with that object that she had asked Mrs. Penfold to take tea with her. She knew that, however alienated her sister and she had been of late years, and however stiffly they had met each other at Briarwood, the familiarity of a close relationship is not easily dissolved, and that a cup of tea would probably soon loosen the string of Maria's tongue. And she was not mistaken. When the ladies were comfortably ensconced before the tea equipage, and the buttered toast had been sent up exactly to their satisfaction, the conversation became more sisterly and confidential.

“Of course,” observed Mrs. Pinner, “I was as pleased as yourself that our cousin should make so good a marriage. We have plenty of young ladies in Bluemere,—pious, well-trained, and domestic girls,—and it was a matter of great surprise when the minister passed them over in favour of Phyllida Moss. For though I cannot deny she fills the position well,—in point of looks and dress, and so forth,—yet Phyllida has not yet been “*called*,” Maria, and if you have any remembrance of the teachings of our estimable parents, or knowledge of the ways of the elect, you must confess that what I say is true.”

“Phyllida doesn’t *talk* much,” replied kind-hearted Mrs. Penfold, “but she *does* more than many ladies in her position would trouble themselves to do. She is constantly employed amongst the sick in the parish. And she is a most devoted wife, Charlotte, no one can deny that. Mr. Freshfield perfectly adores her.”

“Is it a justifiable thing for a clergyman to *adore* a frail mortal creature, or to let his friends think he does so? Oh, I see a sad difference in Mr.

Freshfield since his marriage, Maria, though I would say so to no one but yourself. But he is always in a hurry to get home now, and scarcely ever has time for a chat or a cup of tea, as he used to have. And his marrying Phyllida was a sad blow at Blue Mount! I have that on the very best authority."

Mrs. Penfold was about to reply, when her attention was directed to a figure coming up the garden path. It was that of Annie Warren, eager and excited, from a certain circumstance that had just taken place at Westertown.

"I am afraid you are going to have a visitor, Charlotte," she said, "and that our conversation will be interrupted."

Mrs. Pinner glanced from the window.

"My dear, it is only Annie Warren, one of the best creatures in the world, and devoted to me. You can speak as freely as you choose before her; in fact, she is a bosom friend both at Briarwood and Blue Mount, and knows as much about Phyllida as we do."

"I could not discuss such private matters before a stranger," replied Mrs. Penfold.

But Miss Warren's enthusiastic and gushing manner soon drove this resolution out of her head. She entered the room evidently brimful of news, or eager to extract some information from her hostess.

"You dear, *dear* thing," she cried, falling upon Mrs. Pinner's neck,—(Miss Warren had been rather given to displaying this exuberant affection for Mrs. Pinner lately),—"I am so glad to find you have a friend to talk to; I was half afraid you were alone this evening. Your sister, is it? Oh, I *am* pleased to have an opportunity of making her acquaintance. I might have guessed she was your sister though, for she has just your own sweet smile! I hope you are going to make a long stay in Bluemere, Mrs. Penfold? It will be such a treat for dear Mrs. Pinner to have you here. She is always talking of you, and longing for your company. Aren't you, dear?" concluded Miss Warren affectionately.

"Come, come, you naughty girl," replied her hostess, delighted at the small homage paid her, "you must take off your hat and sit down and have a cup of tea with us. No, not one more kiss. You know it is all nonsense, and you don't mean it."

"How *unkind!*" said Miss Annie, with a reproachful glance, "when you know you are my very best friend. Do you think *I* would have run away and left you for the first person who asked me, as somebody else did?"

"Well, I don't know," replied Mrs. Pinner, with unintentional sarcasm. "If the *minister* had been the person, I think you would."

"*The minister!*" cried Miss Annie, with ineffable scorn. "No indeed, Mrs. Pinner, the minister would never have had the power to tempt *me* away from any one. If ever I marry, my husband must be a man of sense and strength of character, and not a poor, weak creature like Mr. Freshfield, who can be led by anybody."

"Dear me," said Mrs. Penfold, "you surprise me, Miss Warren. I have always considered Mr. Freshfield to be a young man of so much determination and power."

Miss Annie smiled.

"And yet you are staying at Briarwood, Mrs. Penfold? How blind you must be! Can't you see how Mrs. Bernard leads her husband by the nose?"

His poor dear mother is quite distressed about it. She nearly cried when she spoke of them yesterday afternoon. Oh, you mustn't mind my speaking so openly, but Mrs. Pinner will tell you that I am quite like one of the family at Blue Mount, as I *used* to be"—with a deep sigh—"at the rectory, when my darling Alice was mistress there."

"Yes, indeed!" echoed Mrs. Pinner; "and as you *ought* to be now, my dear, considering all the trouble you took on their behalf. Why, this dear girl was nurse and housekeeper, and everything you may say, Maria, to the minister's first wife; and how he can ever forget it, passes my comprehension. But there will be a reward laid up for you, my dear, in the next world."

"I know that, dear Mrs. Pinner," said Miss Annie modestly; "but it comes a little hard sometimes, does it not? However, I have done my duty—that is my satisfaction; and if Mr. Freshfield's eyes are blinded to it now, they may not be so always."

"Don't you and Phyllida get on well together?" demanded Mrs. Penfold bluntly.

"Oh yes, my dear madam; and it is no question of getting on well—it is the sad incontestable fact that dear Mrs. Bernard has not yet heard the voice of grace calling her into the fold, and the ways and words of her husband's former friends do not suit her. It was different with our sweet Alice. She was truly a child of heaven."

"My cousin seems to take unusual interest in her husband's parish though. I heard Mr. Freshfield reprove her to-day for going out in the rain to practise with the church choir."

"Oh yes, her singing is charming, no doubt of that—almost too charming, one might say, for a private lady. Our organist, Mr. Barnes, quite thought Mrs. Bernard was a professional artist when he first heard her. He said there was a tone about a regularly-trained voice that was unmistakable. But (as I told him) that must be quite impossible."

"*Quite* impossible," repeated Mrs. Penfold decisively.

"A professional artist!—our cousin," ejaculated Mrs. Pinner. "Oh dear, what an awful report to get about the village! I hope you checked it at

once, Miss Warren? It would be the death of poor Mrs. Freshfield if it reached Blue Mount."

"Of course I checked it, dear Mrs. Pinner. I said how could it be, when Mrs. Bernard came here straight from St. Domingo. I am afraid the climate had an effect upon her health, Mrs. Penfold—she is not very strong."

"*Not strong!* You surprise me. I considered she had so vastly improved since her marriage. She looks blooming to me."

"Ah, she has a nice colour sometimes; yes, but these fainting fits are not a good sign."

"I was not aware that Phyllida was given to that weakness. Does she faint often?"

"I don't know, but she faints very easily. I was at Briarwood about two months ago, at breakfast-time—I often run in on business matters, you know: *he* likes me to do so—and Mr. Freshfield was in the midst of reading us one of his letters, when down she dropped in a swoon, or at least she *said* it was one."

"Poor thing!" exclaimed Mrs. Penfold concernedly; "you don't mean to say so?"

"Yes," continued Miss Annie, with her gaze fixed upon her two companions, "it was just as he was reading a letter from an old friend of his, *Mr. Nelson Cole*."

But not the faintest token of recognition passed over either lady's face.

"It must have been the heat," observed Mrs. Pinner.

"I don't think so," said Miss Warren; "I fancied it was something in the letter. Perhaps the name was familiar to her. Mrs. Bernard always looks to me as if she had had trouble."

"Ah, poor dear," ejaculated Mrs. Penfold, with an ominous shake of the head.

"What! do you know anything about it, Maria?" demanded Mrs. Pinner curiously.

"I know Phyllida has had heavy trouble," replied her sister, "because she confided as much to me in Gatehead. She said her past weighed terribly upon her mind, and I told it was her duty to forget it all as soon as possible. For what good does it do us to be always raking up old worries and fretting ourselves because we can't remedy them?"

"I don't think you were right, Maria. Perhaps it was the rod of grace designed to chasten her and keep her low; we should be careful how we interfere with the designs of Providence. But doubtless you meant it for the best."

"Of course I did. I thought it a pity that a fine young girl like Phyllida should waste her life in lamenting things that could never be undone, especially when there was a good man like Mr. Freshfield ready to help her to forget them."

"And you have not heard the name of Nelson Cole before, then? He is not likely to be connected in any way with the past troubles of Mrs. Bernard Freshfield?" said Miss Annie inquisitively.

"Not in any way that we know of, though of course he may have been a friend of her father's," replied Mrs. Pinner. "We never knew Mr. Moss, you must remember. Our only connection with Mrs. Bernard comes through her mother, and as we never saw Phyllida till she came to Bluemere, she may have dozens of friends and connections of whom we know nothing."

"It is strange you should have heard so little of

her former life. She is not very communicative," persisted Miss Warren; but at the same time she resolved to say nothing of the news she was burning to reveal. Since the two old ladies could not assist her, she was determined they should not spoil probable sport.

"And where have you been to-day?" inquired Mrs. Pinner presently, as she glanced at her visitor's unusually festive attire.

"I have been spending the day at Westertown," replied Miss Warren. "My brother had business there, and as I wanted to do a little shopping I accompanied him. And we dined at the Crown Hotel, and they were so busy, you can't think."

"Was it market day?" asked Mrs. Penfold innocently.

"No; but there are several strangers staying there, and all their luggage was piled up in the hall, and I—"

But here Miss Warren stopped short, as though she could not trust herself to proceed any further. Presently she went on,—

"Is Mrs. Bernard at home this evening, Mrs.

Penfold? Do you think I shall be intruding if I run in to Briarwood for half-an-hour?"

"I know she is at home," replied Mrs. Penfold, "and I should not think, since you are so intimate with them, that you *could* intrude."

"*I* should be surprised if it were possible, considering all you have done for the minister and his belongings," interposed Mrs. Pinner.

"Well, then, if you two dear creatures will excuse me, I will leave you again and run on there, because I wish especially to ask Mr. Freshfield a question regarding the schools. Good-night, dear Mrs. Pinner, and to you too, dear Mrs. Penfold. I feel that I shall soon love you almost as dearly as I do your sister."

The old ladies bid her good-night eagerly, not feeling sorry that they were to have a little further conversation in private together, and Miss Annie Warren went on her way to Briarwood with the sly, malicious expression of a cat tracking its prey. It was but a thread she had found in the chain of evidence her fancy had woven against Phyllida Freshfield, but a thread that might lead into a

labyrinth of difficulties for the young couple at the rectory. On one of the trunks piled in the hall of the Crown Hotel at Westertown she had read the name of Nelson Cole.

CHAPTER III.

MISS WARREN feared at first that she had had her walk for nothing, for the news that greeted her on arriving at Briarwood was, that both Mr. and Mrs. Freshfield were out. The man-servant, who opened the door to her and who disliked her as much as his master did, tried all he could to prevent her entering the house. He could not tell where either his master or mistress had gone, nor when they were likely to return; it might be that night, it might be the next morning; he was sure it would be useless her remaining in the hope of seeing them. But Miss Warren was persistent in her inquiries, and at last elicited the intelligence that Mrs. Freshfield had been sent for in the middle of dinner to a young girl who was said to be dying, and that the parson had received a letter after her

departure, which had compelled him to spend the night away from home.

So he had left Bluemere not half-an-hour before, and ordered the servants to sit up and await their mistress's return.

"A sick girl!" ejaculated Miss Warren; "that must be Sarah Jeffrey's. No one else is sick at present in Bluemere. Dying! Pooh! nonsense. It's only one of her false alarms. She always thinks she's dying! Mrs. Freshfield will see through the trick before she has been there half-an-hour. I shall sit down till she returns."

Finding his remonstrances vain, the servant opened the door of the library, in which there was a large fire burning, and ushered Miss Warren to the room. She ensconced herself in Bernard's own armchair, and being left alone, fell to wondering what business had called the parson away from Bluemere. Could he have heard of the advent of Nelson Cole and gone to Westertown to meet him, and if so, would he bring him back to Briarwood? As Miss Annie speculated thus, and let her black eyes range over each article in the room, they

lighted on a note which lay conspicuously upon the writing-table. It was a half-sheet of paper, hastily screwed into the shape of a *billet-doux*, and addressed to Phyllida in pencil—just such a note in fact as a husband unexpectedly called from home would leave behind him for the satisfaction of his wife. Miss Warren had very few absurd scruples with regard to the dishonour of prying into the correspondence of another. She seized the note with alacrity, and made herself mistress of its contents.

“DEAREST PHYLLIDA,—I have just received a letter from my dear old chum Nelson Cole, who is actually in Westertown. He was suddenly dispatched to England on some important business connected with his employers’ firm, and says he cannot go back without paying us a flying visit at Briarwood. It is so good of the dear old fellow. I am going to see him at the Crown Hotel at once, and I shall not be back again until to-morrow morning—perhaps not till the afternoon, if there is anything to detain us there. But then I shall bring

him with me, and I am sure you will welcome him for my sake.—Ever dearest, your loving husband.”

Miss Warren twisted the note round and round in her fingers.

“I wonder if the servants know why he was called away?” she thought. “I don’t think Edwards does, because he did not seem quite sure if he had gone to Westertown, or somewhere else. Possibly they are aware their master left a note for his wife in the library, but then scraps of paper like this are easily lost or mislaid. It will be nothing very extraordinary if, when they come to search for it, they find it is gone. Yes; I think I shall be quite safe in destroying it. *If* Mr. Nelson Cole should prove to have been a friend of Mrs. Bernard’s, as well as of her husband, this note will give her time to prepare herself for meeting him. She will be taken ill before to-morrow, and have to go to bed, or to visit the sea-side, or she will receive a sudden summons somewhere, and leave Mr. Freshfield to do the honours of Briarwood alone. *I* know their nasty, shabby tricks; and if ever a woman

looks as if she could be up to tricks, it's Mrs. Bernard Freshfield! So I will just drop this bit of paper in the fire, and leave my lady to meet Mr. Nelson Cole without any warning of what is before her."

She walked up to the fire-place as she thought thus, and threw the note upon the burning coals. In another instant it was reduced to ashes. Then Miss Warren rang the library bell, and walked towards the door.

"You may show me out, Edwards," she said, as she met the servant. "That girl, Jeffreys, has evidently deceived poor Mrs. Freshfield into imagining she is really ill! It is nearly ten o'clock, and I cannot wait any longer."

"I said I was afraid it would be no use your waiting, miss," replied Edwards, as he preceded her along the warmed and lighted corridor, and threw open the portals of Briarwood. As he closed them upon her, he muttered something not entirely complimentary, to the effect that he wished it were for the last time. Miss Annie Warren was thoroughly disliked in the rectory servants' hall. But when Phyllida returned nearly an hour after-

wards, she received a very different sort of reception. It was not only because she was their master's wife, that she was waited on so cheerfully by every dependant in his household. Her kind words and smiles repaid her servants for all the trouble they took for her; and Edwards opened the door almost as soon as she touched the bell, whilst Mrs. Garnett appeared in the hall to inquire if she were cold or tired, and her own maid stood ready to divest her of her wraps, and exchange her walking shoes for easy slippers.

"No, I'm not tired at all, thank you, Mrs. Garnett," she said brightly, in answer to the house-keeper's inquiries, "only very cold. There is a bitter frost to-night. But I am so glad I went. Poor Sarah is much worse. Dr. Jenkyns does not think she will live till the morning; and she was fretting so to see me. Where is Mr. Freshfield? In the library?"

"My master is out, if you please, ma'am," interposed Edwards; "he had a letter soon after you started, and was obliged to go to Westertown; and he is afraid he won't be able to get back to-night."

What a blank fell upon Phyllida's heart at the intelligence! She had become so used to the cheering influence of that dear sunny face of Bernard's and to the tones of his voice. The prospect of passing twelve hours without him appeared terrible. Her sweet face fell to twice its usual length.

"Out!" she repeated. "Gone over to Westertown, and at this time of night. What can have taken him there?"

"I don't know I'm sure, ma'am," replied Edwards respectfully. "The master was in a great hurry, and hardly spoke to any of us. But I think he left a note or a bit of writing of some sort for you, ma'am, leastways I fancy he said so, but it may be a mistake of mine; if not, I conclude, it must be in the library."

"Oh, of course he would write," cried Phyllida confidently, as she ran into the library, and searched on every table for a paper in her husband's hand; but she could find none, for the good reason that, as we have seen, the note he left for her was resolved to nothing in the burning fire.

"I can't find it, Edwards," she said, in a tone of disappointment.

"I'm afraid I must have been mistaken then, ma'am, for as I said before the master was in a terrible hurry, and spoke very rapid-like. But it's nothing bad as has taken him out, for he said he had had capital good news; and he'd be home to-morrow for certain."

"Ah, well, then, I must be content with that," said his mistress, with a half laugh, but she felt a little uneasy nevertheless. It was so unlike Bernard to leave home without further explanation than he could afford to servants. Mrs. Penfold's return was some sort of comfort to Phyllida, and they sat up late together, suggesting all sorts of reasons to each other for the parson's sudden disappearance, but were finally obliged to separate for the night without having come to any conclusion, excepting that they were equally anxious for the morrow to bring them the solution of the riddle.

Meanwhile Bernard's capital horses had carried him quickly to Westertown, and he was enjoying himself thoroughly in the company of Nelson Cole,

whom he found hearty and congenial as ever. He had had a double reason for setting off so speedily to welcome his old friend. Not only was he anxious to prove that his feelings were unchanged, but he felt rather shy at having to break to him the news that all his grand resolutions with regard to a second marriage were broken, and he was already in the possession of another wife. He thought he could stand the first looks of astonishment, and the cynical remarks that were sure to follow his announcement, better if he were alone with Nelson Cole than in the presence of Phyllida. So he had started off, determined to get it all over that evening, and bring his friend back to Briarwood the next day, fully prepared to greet and approve his choice.

The warm welcome he received as soon as he had placed his foot inside the "Crown" was all that Bernard's heart could desire, and it was a long time before Nelson Cole could leave off shaking the hand of the "boy with the monkish, close-shorn face, whom," he had acknowledged to himself, "he took so deep an interest in."

"And is this really you, Freshfield?" he kept on exclaiming. "Driven out seven miles on a winter's night in order that you may meet an old chum twelve hours earlier! I am glad of it. It is like yourself, my boy. It proves that your profession has not altered your nature, and that you still have a corner in your heart for the wicked ones of the earth, and a remembrance of the jolly old days at Oxford when I used to give you youngsters suppers at my rooms, and help you to evade the vigilance of the dons in the morning. Ha! ha! ha!"

"When you used to be the very kindest and jolliest and most generous friend a young fellow ever possessed," cried Bernard. "No; may I perish before I forget it—or you! You can't think how delighted I was to receive your letter, Cole! Your last spoke so definitely of your remaining in the States that it was the most joyful surprise. I think if it hadn't been for the servants, and that they would have thought it undignified in a parson, I should have jumped for joy. I know I ran off in such hurry and confusion, that I don't think they have the least idea where I have gone to."

"That doesn't matter, my boy! that's the best of a man being unshackled by any ties—he can come and go as he pleases without asking leave of anybody—in fact, he is *free*. And now you are come, you will stay, Bernard? You must be my guest for to-night; and to-morrow, if it so pleases you, I will run back with you to Bluemere and enliven your loneliness with a few days of my society."

"I hope you will make it a good many days, my dear old friend," said Bernard.

"I should like it above all things, but I fear it is impossible. A week must be the outside of my visit. I am due at Liverpool on the 10th of next month. But it is very good to see you, if only for a week, my son. And how well you are looking, boy. Not much like a disconsolate widower, eh?"

"But I thought I told you I was *not* disconsolate!" replied Bernard sheepishly.

"Ah yes, to be sure, you wrote me the most wonderful letter, all about the impossibility of your ever marrying again—wasn't that it? on account of not being able to find a true soul union. But come,

don't look so foolish about it. You're quite right, my boy, and the longer you stick to such principles the better. Looking out for a soul union may keep you from worse scrapes, and as you will never find it, the close of your life will see you just such another jolly, careless bachelor as I am."

"But—but—perhaps what I told you I so earnestly desired, Cole, may not be so entirely out of my reach as you seem to imagine," stammered the parson.

"Well, look here, Bernard, we'll discuss that matter presently—it's too hard a nut to crack standing. Now, which are you for, dinner or supper?"

"Neither, thank you. I dined at seven this evening. In fact we—I had done dinner when your letter arrived."

"Just so! well, I have dined myself, so we agree on that point. You smoke, I suppose?"

"Oh yes! That is a habit I cannot persuade myself to relinquish."

"Why should you? Is it wrong? What can you manage over your pipe. I always take whisky and water."

"And I will join you, Cole. I like nothing better."

"All right, my boy." So the order was given, and the two men sat down opposite each other with their pipes in their mouths, ripe to unbosom themselves of their dearest secrets. For what letting down her back hair is said to be to a woman, lighting his pipe is to a man, and crass ignorance alone supposes that the difficulty of keeping a secret is confined to one sex. But for a few moments they smoked on in silence, whilst Nelson Cole was thinking into what a fine fellow young Freshfield had developed; and Bernard considered in what words he should introduce the subject of his marriage, so as to excite the least amount of ridicule at the hands of his friend.

"And so you are living in fine style, I suppose, up at Briarwood?" remarked Nelson Cole presently; "that was a splendid pair of cobs you drove over just now."

"Yes, they are considered good horses. I bought them of Lord Dinderslie, and I keep up a very fair establishment. I *ought* to, you know, with my income."

“Two thousand a-year, isn’t it, with another six or seven hundred from the living. A very good income indeed for a single man, Bernard. How do you contrive to spend it all?”

“Oh, it goes easily enough,” replied the other with a nervous laugh. “I keep seven or eight servants in the house alone, and we have half-a-dozen horses in the stables, and my farm is more expense than profit to me.”

“What can you want with half-a-dozen horses? You can’t exercise them all yourself, and eight servants too! It’s a mistake, Bernard, my boy, to keep people and animals eating their heads off, however large your income may be. You should see the establishment with which I travel in the States. One man—one horse! It makes no difference to me if I am in New York or a village. I never exceed it, and it’s enough for anyone in the world.”

“Yes, I quite agree with you, Cole, if—if—that is, while a man is single. But otherwise one must keep up a certain establishment for the sake of one’s position in the county, and—”

"Quite true," interrupted Cole, "only as you do not intend to marry again—"

"I know I wrote something of the kind to you—a long time ago though, wasn't it? but I have been trying to tell you several times since we met that—that—in fact—I *am* married again, and have been for the last six months."

"*What?*" exclaimed Nelson Cole, pushing back his chair and staring in young Freshfield's blushing face, "what is that you say? *Married again!* Found the soul union so speedily! Satisfied your heart's hungering after a true mate. O Jupiter! O Venus! Why can't you confine your machinations to us poor mortals who never boasted of our virtue, and not go turning the parsons upside down in this worldly fashion? Is it *possible*, Bernard? Married again? And where did you find her, my boy? In a palace or on a dunghill—clothed in satin or rags? Oh, ye gods and little fishes! you have upset all my calculations. I came here prepared to stare at a real live voluntarily elected monk, and I find nothing but an ordinary Benedict, henpecked, most probably, like the re-

mainder of his species. *Married again!* I can't believe it! I must ring for some more whisky and water."

"Go on laughing at me," said Bernard. "I quite expected it, and perhaps I deserve it; but all the same, Cole, I am very happy."

"Of course you are happy, my boy. They always *are* happy for the first few months. Amaryllis retains every virginal charm that first attracted you to her; until some day she loses her temper or her figure, or bolts with your dearest friend. But *your* Amaryllis has servants and carriages and horses at her command, so perhaps she will behave herself, at all events till some one richer than you are spends a summer in Bluemere."

"Don't talk like that—there's a dear fellow," replied Bernard gravely, "or at all events not of *my* wife. You don't know what she is, Cole, or you would not sneer at my faith in her. And I will not try to tell you; you will see her to-morrow, and be able to judge for yourself."

"I'm no judge of women," returned Cole curtly; "I have not seen enough of them to become so;

and I class them all in one lump as the natural enemies of man. They stick to him—true! as the horse-leech sticks to its victim until every drop of blood has been drawn from his lifspring. No, I am afraid you would not consider my opinion worth having, Freshfield. I don't deny the necessity of women in the world. I am only sorry when I see one of my friends in their clutches. They are creatures to be bent to our purposes—not queens to tyrannise over our fortunes.”

But all that Bernard Freshfield answered was,—

“You have not yet seen my Phyllida.”

“What did you say was her name?”

“Her maiden name was Phyllida Moss. She is a cousin of one of our oldest residents in Blue-mere.”

“You had known the lady a long time, then?”

“No,” replied Bernard consciously; “a very short time, if you count by weeks.”

“How the deuce *should* I count?” said Cole; “I suppose she is handsome? a pretty face will lead a man to perdition.”

“People tell me she is beautiful, but I hardly

seem to see it. I only know that she is mine, and that I love her."

"An old story," grumbled Cole, "and one that thousands of fellows have told before. Only there is generally a sequel to it. There generally comes a day when they wish she belonged to anybody else. Ah, Bernard, my lad, I'm sorry to find you in the toils again; but so long as your wife doesn't forbid your smoking a pipe and drinking a glass of whisky and water with an old friend, you may manage to pull through life yet."

"Phyllida is not that sort of woman," said Bernard fervently; "she leaves me as absolutely free as I wish to leave her; and I am sure, when you have seen her in her own house, that however little you may care for her sex, Cole, you will acknowledge she is all that a woman ought to be. I married her because I felt her to be so sweet and lovable, I longed for her daily companionship and sympathy, and I told her plainly that I did not wish her to take any part of the parish duty. Yet I put no restraint on her actions, and the result is, that her own sweet, womanly nature has led her to do

more than many who assume such cares, from the mere sense of right. She is the angel of Bluemere. There is not a house that harbours sickness or trouble but what knows the comfort of Phyllida's presence. I have seen mothers swooning over their little one's death-beds in her arms; I have seen children die there. I have watched the looks of gratitude and eager expectation with which the sick have greeted her approach. I have heard the blessings that have been poured out upon her head, and I have thanked God who, in giving her to me, has given her also to those suffering people, who require her perhaps more than I do. But what she is to me, Heaven and my own heart alone can tell! Laugh at me if you will, Cole, I only speak the truth."

There was silence between the friends for some minutes after the young husband's speech was ended.

"I am not going to laugh, Bernard," said Cole at length; "I don't even feel inclined to do so. I daresay your wife is all that you believe her to be; even if she were not, you are a lucky man to be

able to believe it. But let us understand each other, old friend. I don't wish to say anything disrespectful of Mrs. Freshfield. She may be an angel (and in that case you will allow that, in speaking of women, I do not touch her); but you are right in saying I don't care for the sex. I have had little reason to do so; and much as I love you, I am not quite sure that I should have volunteered a visit to Briarwood had I known you had re-established a mistress there. I began life with much the same ardour as you have, my boy. I believed that every beautiful face I saw was the index of a nature as beautiful as itself, and I got into several awkward scrapes in consequence. But it took some years to break down my confidence. I went on and on, hoping against hope, to find the ideal woman I sighed for, and when I did find her (as I believed), she turned out worse than the whole lot put together. Then my eyes were opened to see the sex as they really are, and I have been much happier since. I have left off expecting impossibilities, and am content to take woman for what she is, a weaker, more foolish, and rather less moral specimen of

humanity than ourselves; and that is not saying much for her."

"Dear Cole," replied Bernard affectionately, "you must have been very hard hit to talk like this. I had no idea you had ever had anything to do with women. We always considered you such a regular Saint Kevin at college."

"Which is as good as saying you didn't think I was a man! No, my boy, we can't do without women in this world—but we can avoid the error of believing them to be more than women. You are still young and—for your age—very fresh! When you have reached my time of life you will talk differently. I can only hope your awakening may not be as bitter as was mine. And now let us speak of something more congenial. I am anxious to take back an English hunter with me to the States. Can you recommend me to an honest dealer with a good stud?"

Bernard sighed. He would have liked to sit up half the night discussing Phyllida's virtues with his friend, but he saw that the subject bored, if it did not annoy him, and wisely dropped it. He could

only hope that the sight of his wife's beautiful face, and the charm of her girlish manner, might have the effect of winning over Nelson Cole to his own way of thinking. But for that he must wait for the morrow. The next morning he drove his friend over to the stables of a well-known breeder, some ten miles distant from Westertown, so that it was far advanced in the afternoon, almost dusk, in fact, when he turned his horses' heads into the Briarwood drive. His heart was beating rapidly by that time, for it was the first occasion since his marriage that he had been absent from Phyllida for more than an hour or two, and he was impatient to look upon her again and to present her to his friend. As they came in view of the house, which Nelson Cole admired without stint, Freshfield could hear nothing that was said to him for the eagerness with which his eye roved over the lawn and garden paths, to catch a sight of his wife's figure, and when he saw it, he became childish in his delight. Cole was just asking him, in what style of architecture Briarwood Hall was built, when Phyllida, clad in fur and velvet, and followed by a rough St. Bernard mastiff

and two or three smaller dogs, came quickly round the house to meet them.

"Is it Elizabethan, or of a later period?" demanded Cole.

"There she is! There is my wife!" exclaimed Bernard in reply, as he threw the reins to his groom and leaped to the ground.

There was no false shame about the parson. Although the servants and Nelson Cole were standing by, he took Phyllida in his arms and kissed her fondly.

"How are you, my darling? Did you think I was never coming home again? Of course you found my note in the library? And here is the friend for whom I told you to prepare a hearty welcome—my dear old chum, Nelson Cole."

"New caught from the States, madam, at your service!" said Cole himself, as he advanced to take her hand. But instead of offering it to him, she fell against her husband heavily.

"Did you trip against a stone, dearest? Are you hurt?" he exclaimed as he felt her weight. But

Phyllida was standing straight again in a moment—straight, steady, and almost rigid.

“I—am—very—glad—to—see—you,” she articulated in measured tones, as she stretched out her hand to Nelson Cole.

Bernard was disappointed. He had spoken so freely of her warmth and geniality of manner! Was this the best welcome she could extend to his oldest friend?

“You know who this is, don’t you, Phyllida?” he interposed briskly. “You have often heard me speak of Nelson Cole, who has been out in America for the last five years. It was such a delightful surprise to me to get his letter yesterday; but I told you all that in my note. You found my note, of course, darling?”

Phyllida shook her head. Her lips seemed glued together; she could not speak.

“You didn’t find my note? Silly child, where did you look for it? I put it on the top of my blotting book. But let us come in to the fire. It is freezing hard again, and it strikes me we all

want thawing. Come in, Cole, and welcome a thousand times to Briarwood!"

He drew his friend's arm through his own as he spoke, and led him along the lighted corridor and into the comfortable library, believing his wife to be by his side. But when they turned into the room he found she had escaped him. To his surprise, and somewhat to his mortification, his beautiful Phyllida, whom he was just going to show off with so much pride to his companion, had eluded his vigilance and slipped upstairs to the bedroom.

"Why, where's Mrs. Freshfield?" he demanded of Edwards, who had followed them in to turn up the lamps.

"I think my mistress has gone upstairs, sir, to remove her walking things," replied the servant.

"How provoking," said Bernard, "I wanted to introduce you to her, Cole; you couldn't see what she was like in that half light—you would have fraternised over this ruddy fire."

"Never mind," said the other cynically, as he warmed his hands. "Mrs. Freshfield has been good enough to leave us the fire. And I shall have the

extra pleasure of seeing her *en grande toilette* at dinner. Women are never happy without their war paint!"

"Phyllida need not have had any scruples on that score. She looks well in anything," replied Bernard, in rather a vexed tone; but Nelson Cole began to praise his house and furniture, and he was soon thinking of something else. Meanwhile Phyllida, with a face of the hue of marble and limbs that felt turned to stone, had dragged her way up to her own room and locked the door against intruders. She must have time, she thought, to breathe, to consider, to plan. What was best to be done? Her first idea was (as Miss Annie Warren had anticipated) that she would run away; that she could not wait there to encounter Nelson Cole again; that it would be utterly impossible for her to go down to the dining-room and sit opposite to him at table under the full blaze of the lamps, with his keen searching eyes fixed upon her face.

As she half-sat, half-leaned upon her bed in the dusky twilight, with her hands clasping her head, and a strong shudder of fear and apprehension per-

vading her frame, a sickening scene, which she tried to shut out in vain, rose before her mental vision,—a scene of glare and gas—of crashing instruments and clamorous voices—a sensation of having done something wrong without being able to prevent it, and then of failing limbs and bitter insult, and a sudden dismissal into the dark frosty night—of disgrace, humiliation, and ruin!

Who was it that had undergone such things? Had any one told her the story of a poor girl thus tempted and fallen, in some remote age and clime, and which she had nearly forgotten until now?

Phyllida passed her hand wonderingly over her velvet and sable costume, and half smiled in a sickly, nervous manner to think she was so foolish as to imagine any one could believe it possible that such a girl had any connection with herself.

But then returned the agonising, common-place thought that *she must go down to dinner*, that there was no escape from that ordeal, and all the fearful struggle with self had to be fought over again.

How she wished she could run away till Mr. Cole had left Briarwood, or lie in bed and pretend

to be ill; but that was nonsense. She knew that she couldn't run away nor lie in bed—it was impossible; the deception would be too transparent not to be seen through at once; and if suspicion existed, it would make it stronger. There was only one thing to be done—she must stand to her ground and brave it out!

Yes; that was her only plan—she must brave it out. There was still a chance that Mr. Cole might not recognise her. She must have changed very much since that time. Every one said her happiness had improved her looks; she was stouter and rosier than in the old days, and her hair was not the same colour. The effects of the golden dye had now completely disappeared, and she wore it in a different fashion. If she were only bold and confident, all would go well.

No one would dare to tell the wife of Bernard Freshfield that he had seen her—*where?* but this idea overwhelmed Phyllida. Love for Bernard, pity for herself, and shame for the humiliating past swept like a tempest over her mind, and drove her beside herself.

“Oh, why did I ever do it?” she moaned; “why did I consent to marry him? I tried so hard to make him see me as I am, but he was blind and deaf to everything but his love for me. Oh, that noble, generous love! Am I doomed to be more guilty than I have ever been before, in uprooting and blighting it for the second time? Bernard, Bernard! I wish I had died before we met! I wish I may die now, with the memory of your loving, trusting face upon my mind, rather than live to see it changed to scorn and loathing! Why—*why* could I not have found some way out of the difficulty, except by pulling him down to share my dishonour? Oh, husband, I never loved you so dearly as I do in this hour of dread that I may live to part with you!”

As she thought thus—moaning, weeping, and rocking herself to and fro upon the bed, Phyllida was startled by hearing Bernard’s voice outside the door.

“Let me in, my darling! I want to speak to you.”

“Oh, Bernie! I shall be ready soon,” she cried,

in stifled tones; "I am very busy—cannot you wait till I go down-stairs?"

"Be quick, then; it is nearly dinner time. But what are you doing, child? Anne says she has been waiting to hear your bell for the last half-hour."

"Making myself beautiful," replied the girl, with an hysterical laugh; "you know I am determined to make a conquest of Mr. Cole."

"I don't think you will find much difficulty, though he is such an old cynic. But don't keep us waiting, my darling; I am as hungry as a hunter."

He laughed merrily as he turned into his dressing-room, and she leaped off the bed and lighted the candles on her toilet table. Her cheeks were white, her eyes were red and swollen; her whole face bore evident signs of strong emotion. "This will never do," she said with a sort of desperation to herself; "this is not the way to brave it out. My craven looks would disgrace a whipped school girl." Then she plunged her face in cold water, and used sundry means to restore her features to their usual appearance, before she rang the bell for her maid.

"Put on my prettiest dress to-night, Anne," she

said, with affected gaiety, as the servant entered, "for the master wants me to look my very best."

"Will you wear the white cashmere, or the silk, ma'am?" demanded Anne.

"The cashmere, and the gold fillet through my hair. Twist it up as tight as you can, please. I don't like to feel it falling about my face. There. That will do! I am afraid I look rather pale this evening. The cold weather has set in so suddenly, I feel chilled—and poor Sarah Jeffrey's death this afternoon quite upset me. I know Mr. Freshfield will stare at my eyes; the frost has made them red—but I can't help it. Thanks; that is quite sufficient, and the sooner I get down to the fire the better."

Thus, talking rapidly in order to avoid her own thoughts, and anxious to rush at once into the thick of the battle, lest delay should bring hesitation or cowardice in its train, Phyllida gathered her creamy skirts about her, and almost ran down to the library, expecting without doubt to find her husband there. But when she had entered the room, beyond retreat, she discovered its sole occupant to be Nelson Cole,

who, leaving his warm corner by the fireside, advanced to meet his hostess. His first impression of her was certainly a favourable one. He had done no more than catch the outline of a graceful figure in the dusky afternoon; but here, beneath the lamp-light, stood a woman whom he decided at once to be a sufficient excuse for any folly on the part of Bernard Freshfield. Like some dainty creature stepped out of an old picture she stood before him, and as his glance travelled from the folds of her soft clinging dress to the fair face set in its framework of chesnut hair and the starry eyes that beamed with a half-anxious half-frightened look, Nelson Cole confessed to himself that he had seldom seen a prettier woman. Yet in the first blush of their meeting, something in her features or expression startled him; some remembrance connected with her, returned again and again to puzzle his brain, and his answers to her questions betrayed more inattention than they should have done from a gentleman visitor to so fair a hostess. Her manner too struck him with surprise. It was more than timid or hesitating, it was positively nervous, and

except for her manner, his eyes might not have been so constantly attracted to her features.

"Oh!" she exclaimed with a gasp as she caught sight of him, "I thought Bernard was here! I am sure he came down long ago."

"I have not seen him since he went to dress, Mrs. Freshfield," replied Nelson Cole, as he scrutinised her closely; "but I daresay he will soon make his appearance. Will you not take this seat by the fire?"

"No, thank you, I prefer to sit here," she said, sinking down on a chair in the background. "Have you seen my cousin, Mrs. Penfold? She is here, you know. My cousin with whom I used to live—at least I lived more with Mrs. Pinner than with Mrs. Penfold; but they're both my cousins, you know, and they knew my mother when she was a child."

Nelson Cole began to think Mrs. Bernard Freshfield must be a little "cracked." "What the deuce," he thought to himself, "does she suppose I care about Pinner or Penfolds. If this is Bernard's idea of a companion, Heaven help him!"

But Phyllida, unabashed by his want of reciprocity, went on rapidly, and in a jerky manner,—

"You have never been here before, have you? No, of course not; but we all think it very pretty—Bluemere, you know; but then we live here, you see, and that makes a difference. But you don't live in England, do you?"

"No; and I don't wish to do so. I don't like it," replied Cole, with his usual curtness.

"Oh, here is cousin Penfold!" cried Phyllida, as the door opened to admit that lady and her husband, and Bernard too.

"Oh, Bernie, where have you been? I thought you would have been down ages ago! It is very cold, isn't it? Mr. Cole says he doesn't like England—only fancy! Cousin Penfold, can't you come nearer the fire?"

Nelson Cole began to think his friend had married a great simpleton. But one fact did not escape his notice. (What *did* escape it?) After her husband's entrance, and when he had ensconced himself in the chair next her own, Phyllida sunk into silence. Bernard occasionally addressed an observation to her, and Mrs. Penfold made one or two commonplace remarks; but Phyllida neither

spoke nor moved. She sat in the shadow, dumb and motionless, only once or twice Cole thought he could detect her rapid breathing.

"Why is that?" he pondered; "she is evidently not a chatterbox by nature. What made her run on in that absurd fashion when she found herself alone with me?"

This speculation made him examine her more closely when they were seated next each other at the dinner-table, and he had the opportunity of doing so without being obtrusive. Yet his eyes wandered so constantly her way, with a thoughtful, meditative look in them, that Bernard observed the evident attraction Phyllida possessed for his friend, and began to rally him on it.

"When you've quite finished looking at my wife, Cole," he said, laughingly, "I want you to try this Madeira, which competent judges have pronounced to be of first quality."

Phyllida reddened like a rose, and Nelson Cole became apologetic.

"I trust I have not been guilty of a rudeness," he replied; "but Mrs. Freshfield's face reminds me

so powerfully of one I knew long ago, that it is difficult for me to refrain looking at her. The likeness is surprising. It quite puzzles me."

"I did not think there were two faces like my wife's in the world," exclaimed Bernard; "who was the lady, Cole, and where did you meet her?"

"Very far from here; and in a place of which Mrs. Freshfield has probably only heard the name—the city of Chicago, in America! She was—"

But at this juncture Phyllida completely lost her presence of mind.

"It was not me," she cried excitedly. "How should it be? I don't know her; I never saw the place; I have never been out of England in my life."

In her hurry and agonising fear, she completely forgot before whom she was speaking, and her agitated tones filled her hearers with surprise. Bernard looked across the table with open eyes, and Mrs. Penfold commenced a mild remonstrance,—

"My dear Phyllida, what are you talking about? Never been out of England in your life, my dear, when you were brought up in the West Indies!"

"Oh yes, the West Indies, of course," replied the girl with a scared look; "but I meant I hadn't been in America. Why should I have been? What should take me there?"

"I should have thought from your accent you *were* an American," remarked Mr. Cole drily.

"Her father was," interposed Bernard, "and I fancy she must have caught her accent from him. But Phyllida is not at all herself this evening. I am afraid you are not well, my darling. Have you been doing too much in my absence?"

"She has been at that girl Jeffrey's death-bed all the afternoon," said Mrs. Penfold, "and I think it has tried her nerves. It's not good for a young person to be always seeing such sights, Mr. Freshfield, and I do not think Phyllida is strong enough for it."

"She is always considering others before herself," replied Bernard, smiling at his wife. But Phyllida did not smile in return. She sat with her eyes downcast, flushed, palpitating, and silent. And Nelson Cole's gaze still continued, every now and then, to travel her way, and watch each change in the expression of her countenance. Bernard Fresh-

field took the greater part of the conversation on himself, and talked fluently on all subjects connected with his private and professional life. When the dessert was on the table, and they were comparatively speaking alone, Nelson Cole started the subject of drunkenness, and asked if that vice was prevalent in Bluemere.

"No, I am thankful to say it is not," replied Bernard Freshfield, "for, in my opinion, it is the most degrading that can attack mankind; and I really don't know how I should cope with it. You can reason with men on their other follies, but a drunkard is neither open to reason nor amenable to kindness. It is the most obstinate and the most disheartening weakness one can be called upon to try and remedy. Thank heaven, my people are very little addicted to it!"

"We see an immense deal of it in the States," said Cole; "in fact, a man who refuses to "liquor up" on the score of morality or prudence, is thought very meanly of, and the youngest lads are ashamed to refuse to drink! Even women are not entirely free from the disgusting habit."

"I suppose it must appear incredible to you, Mrs. Freshfield," he continued, addressing himself particularly to Phyllida, "living in an atmosphere of purity and virtue, that a *woman* could even lower herself sufficiently as to become intoxicated; but it is not an unfrequent occurrence. I saw once in Chicago—the very place I was speaking to you of—a beautiful girl younger than yourself (and may I say, almost as fair) in a state of helpless inebriation on the public stage, and—"

But at this juncture he was interrupted by Phyllida rising hastily from her chair.

"I am ill," she gasped, with leaden-coloured lips. "Bernard, I cannot stay here any longer. Let me go to my room," and without another glance at her visitor she staggered to the door, followed by Mrs. Penfold.

"See to her; call me if I am wanted," said Bernard anxiously to the latter lady, as he held the door open for them to pass out, and then he returned to his seat at the table with a perturbed countenance, and pushed the wine across to his friend moodily.

"Is Mrs. Freshfield often attacked like this?" demanded Nelson Cole, as he cracked a walnut.

"No, it is most unusual. I am quite alarmed lest she should be going to be ill; she is generally so well and active, and so full of conversation. She is the very light and life of my home," said poor Bernard with a sigh.

"Strange that she should relapse so suddenly," remarked Cole. "I hope it is not my ugly presence that has brought the change?"

"My dear old chum, how can you speak so? We took her rather by surprise this afternoon; but Phyllida is as glad to see you as I am. I can answer for that."

"Humph!" ejaculated Nelson Cole, and then after a pause he asked, "*where* did you say you met her?"

"Where did I meet my wife? In Bluemere. She came on a visit to her cousin Mrs. Pinner."

"And where did she come from?"

"St. Domingo, I believe. Her family were residents there before her birth."

Nelson Cole started.

"St. Domingo! I know the place as well as I do myself; bad cess to it, and I ought to know her family. How were they called?"

"Moss. Her mother was married for the second time to a Mr. Moss."

"What was her name before that?"

"I do not know."

"Are you acquainted with the father?"

"No."

"Nor any of the relations?"

"How should I be, when I tell you they are all in St. Domingo," replied Bernard rather testily. "I know none of them except her two cousins, and had I known only herself that would have been enough for me."

"Naturally, my dear boy. Relations are only a nuisance; but it is strange I never heard the name of Moss in St. Domingo. I knew every one there."

"Well, it's evident you didn't know *him*," returned Bernard, "and it's of little consequence either, as both her parents are dead."

"And Moss was an American, you say?"

"I believe so."

"I expect he was raised up San Francisco way."

"How can you tell?"

"By Mrs. Freshfield's accent. It has the true Californian ring in it. You can tell a man's State by the twang of his tongue in America."

"Ah, *I* am not so learned," said Freshfield, in a tone of annoyance.

"Of course not. It is strange how your wife reminds me of the face I mentioned, and the more I look at her, the greater resemblance I see between them."

"I did not think there were two such lovely women in the world," replied the husband proudly.

"You were right. No more did I. And Mrs. Freshfield's eyes are very remarkable ones, you will observe, for colour and size and expression. You seldom meet brown eyes with so plaintive a look in them."

"Like the eyes of a hunted deer, we have often remarked it," said Bernard.

"I should like to see her and my little Chicago friend side by side," continued Nelson Cole; "they might run in a curricule together."

"*I* shouldn't," laughed the other; "one has been enough to upset my peace of mind. I don't know what would become of me between two of them."

When the gentlemen returned to the library, Mrs. Penfold met them with a request that Bernard would go upstairs and wish his wife good-night at once, as she had been very hysterical, and wished to take a composing draught. So the husband left the apartment, and Nelson Cole found himself *tête-à-tête* with the old lady.

"I trust Mrs. Freshfield is not really ill," he commenced politely.

"I hope not, sir, but I really do not know what is the matter with her. She appeared almost delirious to me just now from the rambling way in which she talked."

"She will doubtless feel the cold very much this winter. I believe she came here straight from the West Indies."

"Yes, I believe she did."

"She has not visited America, then? I should have thought from her accent she was fresh from the country."

“I have never heard her mention it, but then you see, sir, we knew nothing of our cousin before she came to England last June, and she has never been very communicative since. I have heard my sister say that, from one or two words Phyllida dropped, she fancied she had travelled farther than she cared to tell; but it was no business of ours, nor of any particular interest either. And I should think that a gentleman, newly come from the country like yourself, would be a better judge than either of us.”

“Yes. Were it not that Mrs. Freshfield denies having been in the United States, I should certainly have said I had met her there. She has a striking face and figure, not easily forgotten. I never saw so close a resemblance between two people in my life.”

He went to bed, still puzzled and uncertain, turning over and over in his mind every reminiscence he retained of that time, yet unable to satisfy himself entirely on the subject, until, as he lay pondering over it all with himself, he suddenly jumped up and exclaimed aloud,—

“I have it! I know what has caused this confusion in my mind. She has altered the colour of her hair. The golden wig has disappeared, *vice* a more clerical hue, and has set all my wits wool-gathering in consequence. But I am pretty certain now, and one more link in the chain will settle my last doubt.”

He went to his despatch box as he spoke, and drew thence from a secret drawer a small piece of folded paper.

“I will give Mrs. Freshfield my little *souvenir* to look at,” he said. “Her husband affirms that she is very sympathetic. The sad story of Stephanie Harcourt will be sure to appeal to her benevolent nature.”

He went back and lay down again on his bed, but he had no further sleep until the morning. At breakfast he was told that Mrs. Freshfield had passed a very restless night, and was not well enough to come downstairs. He received the intelligence with perfect stolidity,—indeed he had quite expected it,—and would not have been surprised had he been told that her illness had turned

out so dangerous she had been obliged to go away altogether. Women he believed to be endowed (in common with the lower animals) with any amount of instinctive cunning, in order to avoid danger. He smiled inwardly when he heard the news, and concluded that he had seen the last of Mrs. Bernard Freshfield, at all events for this visit.

But he was mistaken. Phyllida was only trying to recruit her shaken nerves. She was shocked and horrified when she remembered how she had betrayed herself the evening before, and all her desire now was to remove the impression she must have made upon the mind of Nelson Cole. She promised herself, during those hours of solitude, that she would really be brave this time, and hear all her husband's friend might have to say to her without even changing countenance. She would listen to his story of the drunken actress at Chicago, and ask him what name she went by, and commiserate her sad fate, and say openly that she wished she could find her out and be her friend. She went downstairs at luncheon time full of these grand resolutions, and she trembled like an aspen

leaf at the first sight of the man who held her destiny in his hands. It was some little while before Nelson Cole could contrive to speak to her alone, but at last the opportunity occurred. Bernard was called out to baptise a newborn child, and particularly begged his wife not to leave the house during his absence.

“It is far too chilly, my love,” he said, “and you will make yourself ill again. Stay by the fire with Cole and let him see that I have not overrated my wife’s powers of conversation. I shall not be gone long.”

How little he dreamed what would happen during that temporary absence!

Phyllida stood where he had left her, before the fire, with one foot upon the fender. She was looking into the burning coals; but as the hall-door slammed behind Bernard, she felt that her companion’s eyes were fixed upon her, and in another moment his voice sounded in her ear.

“Mrs. Freshfield, your husband tells me you have a superabundance of sympathy for those who suffer! Will you read these few lines and tell me what you think of the writer?”

He placed a paper in her hands as he spoke, and she unfolded it mechanically, and gazed at its contents.

"What is this?" she asked, in an awed tone.

"Cannot you see? Are you short-sighted? It is a wedding-ring. It was given me by the person who wrote the letter."

She looked at the worn circle of gold long and earnestly, and large tears gathered in her eyes.

"Are you reading the letter, Mrs. Freshfield? Have you no curiosity to see what it says?"

No. Apparently she had no curiosity. Nature was the only thing stirring in her breast just then, and it broke forth in a cry of pain as she raised her mother's wedding-ring to her lips.

Even as they touched it, she felt the grasp of Nelson Cole's hand upon her arm.

"*Stephanie Harcourt*," he said in a stern voice, "*what are you doing here?*"

CHAPTER IV.

PHYLLIDA gazed into the hard, determined face of Nelson Cole, and felt that she had nothing to expect from him. She had anticipated his accusation. In the solitude of her chamber she had imagined that just such a moment might arise when he would turn round and call her by her theatrical name, and she had thought she was fully prepared for the emergency. She had resolved to be so calm and brave, and to return his look with one of such complete astonishment as to disarm his suspicion, and leave him more puzzled than before. But when the time came, all her resolutions melted into thin air. It is difficult to keep a brave front before the truth. Even murderers, with their lives at stake, are forced by some inward power into confession. So, instead of staring her accuser out of countenance and haughtily demanding if he meant to insult her, Phyllida steadied herself with one hand against the library table, and with white lips faltered,—

“You will not betray me?”

Even Nelson Cole was staggered by this abrupt surrender. He had been certain of her identity before he placed the packet with her mother's wedding-ring in her hand; but he had expected to have somewhat of a fight with her, and to bring her to her knees only through threats of exposure to the world. And when she gazed up at him with tearful, pleading eyes, and made that tremulous prayer for pity, his task became a very hard one. He was a stern, cynical man, and he had a mean opinion of her sex; but he was not such a stoic as to be able to destroy all the hopes of such a very pretty woman without a pang. He took two or three steps backward in his surprise.

"It *is* yourself, then?" he ejaculated; "and you confess it? Upon my soul I can hardly believe that it is true. Although I recognised you in the first hour we met, I can scarcely believe that any woman is capable of such an act of wickedness as this. Stephanie Harcourt, are you lost to all sense of decency, or are you mad?"

"Oh, Mr. Cole," she cried, trembling, "don't speak to me like this. You were kind to me once

before when I was in great trouble and distress, and I have never forgotten it. Don't turn altogether against me now."

"*Kind to you before,*" he repeated in a tone of contempt. "What *were* you before? answer me that. Am I to extend the same leniency that I showed to a second-rate actress, discharged for misconduct from the Chicago stage, to the woman I find living at Briarwood as the wife of my friend Bernard Freshfield. How did you come here? What devil sent you to Bluemere? And how dared you impose upon his credulity and trust in you?"

"He *would* marry me," she answered, weeping. "I tried—oh, so hard!—to make him see what a bad thing it would be for him, and how much beneath him I was in every way; but he would not listen to anything I said. He declared his life's happiness was bound up in me, and so I gave myself into his hands to do as he thought best with."

"Don't talk rubbishy sentiment to me," said Nelson Cole brusquely. "This is a matter that is not to be mended with any humbug of that sort.

You know that you are not his wife—that you cannot be—that you are the wife of that forger in the New York Tombs.”

“Oh no, no!” she cried passionately, clasping her hands together; “indeed I am not. Cortès died in the Tombs three months ago. I read the news in the *New York Times*; and I know it is true. And it made me so happy—so very, very happy. I began a new life from that day.”

“Dead, is he?—and three months ago. But what difference does that make to you? You were married to Freshfield *six* months ago.”

“I know I was; but surely, sir, you do not suspect I was not free to marry him? I was divorced from Fernan Cortès before I left the States. I have the papers in my possession. I had no difficulty in getting free from a man who was locked up for two years for forgery.”

“Divorced!” said Cole contemptuously; “pulled through by a Chicago attorney; and when Freshfield does not even believe in the legality of a divorce in his own country, why, in his eyes, you are no more his wife now than you are mine.”

Her brown eyes dilated with horror.

“What!” she ejaculated. “He does not believe in it?—he would consider it a farce, a fraud? Oh, Mr. Cole, you cannot think I knew that? It is the first moment I have ever suspected such a thing. Do you think I would have dragged him down—*he*, who has been so noble, so generous, so loving, to me—to share such a lot as mine—had I not fully believed the past was done with for ever? Bernard not think me free?—still consider me chained to that dreadful man, and whilst his kisses were on my lips? Oh, my God, how I have been deceived!”

“*I* should rather say, how poor Freshfield has been deceived!” replied her companion. “I am afraid to think what he will do when he hears that you have never been his wife.”

“Oh, don’t say that!” exclaimed the girl in a voice of pain; “don’t think it. If you only knew all the love that has passed between us—the confidence we have exchanged—the delight we have had in each other’s society—the thanks we have given to God for our happiness—you would not say we are not married. What *is* marriage but an

union of hearts and souls—a mutual devotion—a tie that no misfortune nor trouble can unloose? And this is what Bernard and I feel for each other. Believe me, sir, we are true husband and wife. It would kill me to think we could ever be otherwise.”

“And do you suppose I can let matters go on in this way, then?” he asked roughly.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I came here to find that you have deceived my best friend; that you are still deceiving him; that he has not the slightest knowledge of your antecedents nor your condition, and that if I leave him in the same deplorable ignorance, I shall prove myself to be his worst enemy.”

“You will not *tell* him?” she screamed; “you will not tell him of Cortès or my having been on the stage? Oh, Mr. Cole, remember *he* is *dead*—he can never rise up to bear witness against me now; and I *am* Bernard’s wife; indeed, *indeed* I am!”

“Stephanie Harcourt, if I acceded to your request, I should become *particeps criminis*, and I will

not do it. Bernard Freshfield must learn the truth—if not from your lips, from mine.”

“Oh, I cannot, I *cannot* tell him,” she moaned; “he has loved me so. You do not know how he has loved me.”

“I know that if he has the noble nature with which I credit him, that he will pretty soon *unlove* you when he hears how he has been deceived. To think of your assurance in coming to a place like this, and taking your stand amongst respectable people, and finishing off by marrying a parson, beats me altogether. I have always known that your sex possess the daring insolence of the devil; that you will trample on proprieties, and carry your cheateries with a high hand, such as men would shrink from assuming; but I think your case is worse than any I have ever heard of.”

As he concluded he advanced suddenly and grasped her again by the arm.

“In the name of evil!” he exclaimed, “what made you leave America?”

She did not resent his rudeness. She only deprecated it by falling at his feet.

“Oh, sir,” she cried, weeping bitterly, “you felt for me once before; show a little mercy to me now. I came to England with the money you sent me.”

(“D—n my folly!” he interposed loudly.)

“I came, only desirous to find honest work, by which to earn my living; but my cousin, Pinner, invited me take a month’s rest at Bluemere first, and here it was I met him. Oh, sir, you do not know, you cannot tell, the temptation it was to me to let him love me. No starving creature with rich food in sight was ever more sorely tempted to steal what was not his to take. But I tried—indeed I did—to prevent his lowering himself by marrying me. I even asked him to take me as I was instead—a lot like that, with such a man as he is, would have been too good for me. But you know his noble nature. He would do nothing less than what was right in his own eyes, and so he married me; and I thought—I thought—I hoped,” she went on sobbing, “until you came, that, by reason of his love and goodness, I might live to become, some day, not all unworthy of him. Oh, sir, you were my good angel once, and took me away from all that

was degrading me, and gave me fresh hopes of life. Don't undo your work now. Don't drag me again from the heaven you helped me to attain, back to the misery from which you lifted me!"

Nelson Cole was moved by her appeal. He felt himself uncomfortably moist about the eyes, and there was a husky sensation in his throat, which made it difficult for him to answer her. Yet his mind never wavered from the idea that it had formed of duty. He loved and respected Bernard Freshfield more than he cared to acknowledge even to himself, and he felt that he could not leave him the dupe of a woman, whose antecedents rendered her quite unfit to fill the high position he had placed her in.

So, although he felt very much for Phyllida—more even than he had done for the trembling and shame-stricken girl whom he had visited and succoured in Chicago—he was firm in his resolution that Bernard Freshfield must learn the truth respecting her.

"You ask me an impossibility," he replied. "I am very sorry for the disgrace you have brought

upon yourself; but you should have told Freshfield everything from the beginning. What right had you to conceal the events of your former life from him?"

"I know I should have done so. I have suffered for it greatly," she sobbed, still kneeling at his feet; "but I thought there was no chance of its ever being raked up again. I hoped it was buried and done with. I believed that that miserable episode need never be any more to me than a half-forgotten nightmare."

"You thought, in fact, that neither I nor Miss Vavasour, nor any of your Chicago friends, would ever show their faces in the mother country! That was not very astute of you, Miss Harcourt. But supposing it had been the case, I think Mr. Jack Neville can tell a few stories about a life even prior to the one you were leading when we met! I conclude you have not quite forgotten that scoundrel Sandie Macpherson, and the Sacramento Valley business, eh?"

She rose to her feet then, and confronted him with a face in which there was no visible feeling but that of indignant scorn.

"I have forgotten nothing—*nothing*," she articulated; "and above all that, every trouble I have encountered in this life—every sin I have committed—has been at the instigation or command of your sex. And you, too, are determined to hunt me down! I read it in your eye and the tones of your voice. Let it be so, then. I will make no further appeal to your pity or your generosity. Bernard Freshfield shall know the worst that you can tell him."

"You will not break the news to him yourself, then? It will be the better for you, perhaps. You women have a thousand little wheedling ways, remember, by which you can induce a man to believe anything you choose, and to forgive everything, even against his calmer judgment! If you will tell the man you call your husband the truth with your own lips, you will probably be able to persuade him to marry you over again."

"You have refused me your sympathy, Mr. Cole; you might spare me your sarcasm! I am only a woman, you know, and cannot be expected to cope with it. And I would rather that you conveyed the

intelligence you speak of to your friend. I don't think it—it—will make him happier, and there is no need that I should add more than my necessary share to his disappointment."

As Phyllida pronounced, with some difficulty, the last word, she turned from him, and with drooping figure and bowed head, left the room. Nelson Cole looked after her uneasily.

"D—n it all!" he thought. "What *am* I to do? I'd give a thousand dollars not to have seen her at all; but having seen her, I cannot reconcile it to my conscience to leave that poor boy in ignorance of her identity! Why, I should be aiding and abetting one of the greatest deceptions I ever heard of. And a parson's wife, too! It beats everything that ever happened to me before. But *I* can't do the job. I must wait a few days and persuade the child to do the right thing herself—she will see on reflection that it *is* right, and will do it from love to him—and then they must slip away quietly somewhere, and be married over again to satisfy his scruples. Hang it all; she is a lovely creature, and I don't wonder at the boy going mad over her. And she's

got some good in her too, poor little soul! and after all she is but a woman! Well, well, it's a most unfortunate business, and I wish I could guess how Bernard will take it. But at all risks it must be done."

And so musing, Nelson Cole, half sorry for Bernard and half sorry for Phyllida, but quite believing that however great a tempest his interference might provoke, the weather would settle down and be fair again after a while, walked round to the stables, and mounting a horse which Freshfield had ordered to be kept for his use, rode off, wondering how the poor little girl was bearing it all, and by what argument he could best induce her to tell her husband the entire truth. And the "poor little girl" meanwhile, stunned by the calamity that had overtaken her, was walking up and down her own room and resolving more determinately with every step, that she would die rather than tell it. The events of the last six months, during which she had gradually been learning to believe herself to be prosperous, respectable, and beloved, seemed to have slidden past her like a dissolving view, and she was once

more the disgraced and unprotected actress of Chicago, who had broken down in *the* song of the evening, and been ignominiously expelled. She shrank even from her own scrutiny, as in fancy she travelled back to that scene of humiliation, and felt as if all Bluemere had been witnesses of it, and she heard their voices reviling her for having dared to pollute their thresholds with her presence. She was no longer Mrs. Freshfield of Briarwood—that dignity had been stripped from her like a stolen garment—she was Stephanie Harcourt, the burlesque actress, and the widow of a criminal who had died in the Chicago gaol. And she, who was all this and more, had pretended to be the wife of a good and pure and true-hearted man, who had believed in her and trusted her, and endowed her with all his worldly goods, and given her *his* mother and *his* sister to be hers also.

Tell Bernard! Go and look into Bernard's faithful eyes, and tell him she had never been his wife!—that she had seduced him into the commission of a crime that must be abhorrent to his feelings;

listen to his reproaches; hear his exclamations of surprise and horror; see his looks of pain! No, no, she could not do it! she would die first; she would throw herself into the mere, as she had felt prophetically before all this misery came to pass, that it would have been best to do.

And neither could she stay whilst Nelson Cole repeated the story of her disgrace—that would be almost worse than telling it herself, like standing in the next room with bated breath whilst some dreadful operation was being performed upon one's dearest friend, unable to help or comfort, because one had not the courage to look upon his inevitable pain. Phyllida told herself incoherently that she could neither use the knife nor see it used. She felt much the same as Charles the First must have felt when Lord Strafford went to his death, guilty to the last degree of the suffering about to be inflicted, but powerless to avert it, and too great a coward to see it put in execution.

Nelson Cole did not return to Briarwood till close upon the dinner hour. It was a raw, foggy afternoon, and riding in the dusk was not exhilarat-

ing exercise, yet he preferred it to the chance of encountering Phyllida without the presence of Freshfield, and being subjected perhaps to another series of piteous appeals for mercy. He had only time to run up to his bedchamber and change his spattered riding suit before the second dinner-gong sounded, and he descended to the hall, where he met Bernard in evident perturbation.

“My dear Cole, I am so annoyed. Fancy, my wife has actually gone out, after all my cautions to her, and in this wretched fog. It is really too bad of my people. She is so good to them they think she is at their beck and call. I suppose some old woman sent up a request for her presence, and the dear child rushed off at once. But I must put a stop to it. I won’t have her health sacrificed for the sake of the parish.”

Nelson Cole looked grave, but all he answered was,—

“It is, indeed, a foggy afternoon. I could hardly see an inch before me as I rode home, and more than once I thought I had lost my way.”

“Imagine Phyllida being exposed to it,” con-

tinued Bernard, in a voice of injury, as they entered the dining-room together. "I do think, Mrs. Penfold, you might have prevented your cousin leaving the house in such weather."

"Indeed, Mr. Freshfield, I am not to blame. I have been in my own room ever since luncheon, and have not even set eyes on Phyllida. I thought she was in the library with Mr. Cole, where I believe you left her."

"To be sure I did. What did she say to you about it, Cole? Have you no notion where she has gone?"

"Not the slightest, my dear fellow. Mrs. Freshfield and I talked together for perhaps half-an-hour after you left us, and then she went up (I imagined) to her own room. It was not until I found she had no intention of returning, that I decided to take a ride. She did not honour me with any confidences as to her plans for the afternoon."

"Well, it is useless saying any more about it," replied Bernard, with evident annoyance. "So let us think of our dinner. She is sure to be back before long."

But the meal that followed was a very silent one. Bernard was fretting at his wife's absence. Nelson Cole, knowing what was in store for his friend, was naturally grave and thoughtful, and Mrs. Penfold could hardly be very lively all by herself. So as soon as the dessert appeared, she rose from table and left the two gentlemen to entertain each other. Bernard sat silent for a few moments, then, striking his hand upon the table,—

“I will stop all my wife's visiting and nursing in the parish from this evening,” he said angrily. “I knew what it would be if she once began such work. Women can never do things by halves. She will end by sacrificing me and her friends, for her fancied obligations to the poor. She doesn't go into a single cottage after to-night. I don't care for this sort of thing, and I won't stand it.”

“Hullo, my boy!” exclaimed Cole, “aren't you coming it rather strong? Mrs. Freshfield may entertain a different opinion from yours. Women, as you justly say, seldom do things by halves, even to having their own way.”

“Phyllida is not like the rest of her sex,” replied

Bernard; "she is a child for docility and innocence."

"Are you so sure of that, Freshfield? You always speak of your wife as if she had not an idea of her own; as if she had never lived a life apart from yours; as if, in fact, she were a nonentity. Now I don't think she is. On the contrary, I find that she has double the amount of experience of most females of her age."

"Has she been confiding to you the history of her former life, then?" inquired Bernard jealously, knowing that no such confidence had ever been reposed in him.

"We have been speaking of it certainly, and I was surprised to find how far Mrs. Freshfield has travelled and how much she has seen. I told her that she must tell the same story to you, and she promised me that she would."

"It seems strange that my wife should tell you, a perfect stranger, of incidents that she has not considered it worth while to mention to myself. Are you sure she was not 'chaffing' you? Phyllida

is rather inclined to be mischievous when she finds a good subject to practise on."

"No, I don't think it was 'chaff,' Bernard. I believe it was sober earnest. Neither does Mrs. Freshfield regard me as a perfect stranger. We came to the conclusion this afternoon that we knew a good deal about each other—in fact, we are not quite sure that we have not met before."

"Well, it's all high Dutch to me," said Bernard pettishly, as he pushed back his chair from the table, and gazed thoughtfully into the fire. He did not relish the idea that his wife—who was so reticent with himself respecting everything in the past—should have been confidential with another man, and became more impatient than ever for Phyllida's return, that he might elucidate the seeming mystery. Nelson Cole, on the other hand, had made his remarks with the best intentions, hoping by them in some measure to prepare the husband's mind for the unhappy news that should greet him when he met his wife again. For he had little doubt in his own mind that Phyllida's absence was due not to her active benevolence, so much as the

perturbed state of her mind, and pictured to himself the unfortunate girl wandering about the plantations or shrubberies in that dense fog, vainly striving to reconcile herself to the inevitable, until he wished he had bitten out his tongue before he had said the words that had driven her from her home. They waited for two or three hours after dinner in vain expectation of her return, and then, Bernard having questioned all the servants, came into his friend's presence with a face the colour of chalk, and announced his intention of searching for his wife in the village.

"I am getting so alarmed, Cole," he articulated with chattering teeth, "I hardly know what to do; but to remain at home is impossible. Not a soul in the house saw Phyllida go out, which is very extraordinary, for the messages from the village always reach her through Mrs. Garnett the housekeeper. I have ordered my horse, therefore, and am going to ride over to my mother's. If she is not there or at Mrs. Pinner's, I shall search for her in Bluemere, for I cannot allow her to remain out on such a night as this. Will you excuse my leav-

ing you, old fellow? You must know the state of anxiety I am in."

"Can't I help you, Freshfield? Let me have another horse and ride over to Brick Common. It lies at some distance from Bluemere, does it not?"

"Oh, she never could have been so mad as to go out to the Common on foot, Cole. It is a long way from this, and I doubt if she could walk it. Besides, it is dangerous ground down by the mere, and I would not allow you to traverse it without company. She must be at Blue Mount, though what has taken her there is beyond my comprehension."

His horse came round as he spoke, and Cole watched him ride off through the fog with a heavy heart. A sudden fear lest the unhappy girl had attempted her own life in the mere had darted through him, and he felt that in such a case he should hold himself guilty of her death. He turned back into the house with a very grave face, and his spirits were not lightened by Mrs. Penfold's melancholy forebodings.

"Do you think it possible anything can have

happened to poor, dear Phyllida, Mr. Cole?" she whimpered. "She has been so strange and unlike herself, both yesterday and to-day, that I quite fear the worst. I told you how she rambled last evening, and though I gave her a sleeping draught she talked all night of the most extraordinary things. And now to run away in this unaccountable manner, and without saying a word to anybody. It is really very unusual; and if anything happens to her, poor, dear thing, in consequence, I am sure I shall never get over it."

"What do you expect to happen to her," returned Cole, in his gruff way, "unless it is an attack of bronchitis or influenza? *That*, I should imagine, to be a very likely result of such an act of imprudence on Mrs. Freshfield's part, and the best thing you can do, Mrs. Penfold, is to see that everything is prepared ready for your cousin to take a hot bath as soon as ever she returns home."

"Oh, you are quite right, my dear sir; thank you so much for the suggestion," replied Mrs. Penfold. "I will go and see to it at once. Of course a hot bath, and just the least drop of brandy and

water to take inwardly, that will be the very thing for dear Phyllida, to prevent the injurious effects of the fog."

She left him to himself as she concluded, and Cole was thankful to be so left, for his anxiety was fast changing into apprehension. He did not employ himself, but sat there eagerly listening for the sound of the horse's hoofs which should bring Bernard back with news of her. They came at last, and as he entered the hall Cole went out to meet him.

"Well, my boy, and where is she?"

"I can't find her," replied Freshfield moodily, as he stalked into the library; "I have inquired at every house in Bluemere, but they have seen nothing of her. She *must* have gone to Brick Common. But it is too bad, too hard of her," he continued, leaning his head in his hands; "she knows how dear and precious she is to me, and might have guessed the alarm I should feel on her account. Besides, I asked her not to leave the house; you heard me, Cole? I asked her as plainly as I could speak not to venture out in this detestable fog."

"I know you did, but I suppose Mrs. Freshfield imagined it was her duty to go. Any way, my dear boy, it can't be helped now, and you must make the best of it. If your wife is at Brick Common, she will be safe enough till the morning, and you had better go to bed and forget this worry in sleep."

"She *must* be at Brick Common," repeated Bernard, "there is no other place for her to be at; and she will be safe enough until the morning, as you say. And yet I don't think I can sleep, Cole, not being certain where she is, and I'd rather sit up in the library until I can start off to look for her again."

"Then I shall sit up with you," said Nelson Cole, and the household being dismissed to their beds, and the horses ordered for seven o'clock the following morning, the friends ensconced themselves in two arm-chairs opposite each other, and prepared to hold a vigil until dawn.

CHAPTER V.

BERNARD FRESHFIELD was naturally very downcast and disinclined to talk; but Nelson Cole told him so many stories of the vigorous life in the New World, that he became deeply interested, and the hours passed more quickly than either had anticipated.

"That is the sort of life that would suit me," exclaimed Bernard, after Cole had been giving him an account of the gold digging in the Sacramento Valley, and described the lawless set of ruffians by which it was conducted. "I should enjoy above all things the freedom and the freshness of such an existence, and I may add, of such a congregation. To do good to such a population would be a real triumph to the worker. The truths of the gospel, where they *did* take root, would fall with such tremendous power on the newly-turned surface of their minds. Such different work from grinding the same tune, day after day and year after year, to children so accustomed to the piping, that they refuse to listen, and far less to dance. Cole, I

should like to be a missionary in Sacramento Valley."

"So you may think, Freshfield, but I fancy you would alter your mind when you had made a trial of it. The specimens *I* have met from Sacramento have not been promising subjects for conversion, I can tell you—murderers, gamblers, ruffians, thieves. There is no description of vice that does not take ready root in that congenial soil—a gold-digging encampment. I have reason to say so, believe me. Some day I may tell you why."

Bernard was about to answer, when the wire of the house-bell grated as though the handle had been ineffectually pulled. It was now nearly six o'clock in the morning, and the sickly, dirty looking dawn, which succeeds a winter's night, was trying to struggle through the holes in the shutters.

"Hark! What was that?" said Cole, as they started simultaneously to their feet. A second passed and again the wire grated audibly, whilst the faintest of tinkles sounded from the bell.

"It is Phyllida," cried Bernard, as he rushed into the hall, followed by his friend, and began

hurriedly to undo the fastenings of the door. But when he threw it open there was no Phyllida upon the steps, only the figure of a little lad, not more than eight or ten years old, whose teeth chattered with the cold.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" exclaimed Freshfield, as he caught sight of him.

"If you please, sir, I've bring'd the letter, and the leddy said as how you'd give me a shillin' for bringin' of it, so I didn't wait longer than I was 'bliged to, cos the leddy says the sooner ye get it the better, so mother tell'd me to run over as soon as 'twas light."

He fumbled in his dirty pocket as he spoke, and produced a crumpled envelope.

"Where is the lady?" exclaimed Bernard impatiently, as he seized the epistle. "Where do you come from?"

"I don't know where she be now; she was a goin' off in the railway; but *I* come from Westertown."

"*Westertown!*" cried Bernard, staggering backward.

"Come, Freshfield," said Cole, "go to the library and read your letter, whilst I settle with the lad. I suppose one can scarcely send him all the way back again without something to eat, so here's your shilling, my boy, and you can go down to the kitchen and sit there till the servants are about. It won't be long now before they're stirring."

It took him a minute or two to usher the shivering little wretch to the kitchen premises, and when he reached the library again he unbarred and threw back the shutters in order to give his friend still further time to overcome whatever shock might be contained for him in that letter. But when, at last, he turned to look at Bernard, he was startled at his appearance. The young man was standing by the table, white, rigid and immoveable, as if he had been turned to stone, with his eyes fixed upon the paper spread open before him.

"Why, Freshfield, old fellow, what's the matter now?" said Cole cheerfully.

"What does this mean?" demanded the other in a hollow tone.

"What does *what* mean?"

"This letter—her letter. Read what she says to me."

Nelson Cole took up the paper, and read the following words:—

"BERNARD,—By the time this reaches you, your friend will have told you all he knows about me; and you will have learned how much you have been deceived. But oh, my darling, don't fret about it; I will never disgrace you more. I am going away where you will never hear of me. Only try to forget everything about me, excepting that I loved you very dearly, and had not strength to do what I ought to have done. But indeed, *indeed*, I believed myself to be your wife.

"PHYLLIDA."

"*What does it mean?*" again demanded Bernard Freshfield, as Cole came to the end of the letter.

"It means, my poor boy, that at last she speaks the truth."

"The truth!—that paper! Take care what you are saying, Cole; the truth that she disgraced me—that she only believed herself to be my wife. Why,

I married her by special licence at Gatehead. She must be mad; you are all mad to imagine such a thing."

"Bernard," said Nelson Cole steadily, as he laid his hand on that of his friend, "there is a great blow in store for you. Bear it like a man."

"Who says I shall not? Because I am a parson, do you suppose I am not a man—as good a man as yourself? But she says you know all about her. What can *you* know that she has not told to *me*—her husband?"

"Unfortunately, a great deal. I wish it were not so. I knew her in Chicago, long before she came to England. I knew her there upon the stage, as a burlesque actress, and not as a very prudently behaved actress. The first time I met her, Bernard, was under very distressing circumstances; she had just been dismissed from her employment for—for—in fact for intoxication."

He glanced at the husband's face as he spoke. It looked as though carved in marble. Only the eyes glared like two balls of fire, and the dry lips muttered harshly the words "*Go on.*"

"Why she came to England after that I do not know; but she had no right to have married you, Bernard, without telling you the truth. She was a married woman, who had obtained a divorce from her husband, and six months ago he was alive in the New York gaol."

"*It's a lie!*" cried the figure by the table; and Bernard Freshfield made a sudden lunge forward, as though he would have struck his friend. The next moment, however, he had fallen backward, striking his head against the steel fender, and lay on the hearth-rug, silent and immoveable, with the blood oozing from a cut on the forehead.

Nelson Cole ran upstairs for a sponge and cold water, and having secured the door against possible intruders, knelt down beside the poor young husband, and administered to him as tenderly as if he himself had been a woman. So that in a few minutes Bernard Freshfield, ghastly pale and shivering, as though he had an ague, staggered to his feet again, and sank down in an armchair.

"There, dear boy, you are better now," said Nelson Cole compassionately; "it's an ugly truth to

swallow, Bernard, and no one knows it better than myself; but you must learn to look it in the face, old fellow, and it will be none the easier for turning your head the other way."

"It *cannot* be true!" murmured Freshfield.

"It *is* true, my son! Unhappily there is not a doubt upon the subject. A year ago, Phyllida Moss was an actress on the Chicago stage, under the name of Stephanie Harcourt, and the wife of a notorious forger and criminal, called Fernan Cortès, then undergoing his sentence in the Tombs at New York. She tells me that she procured a divorce from Cortès before she left Chicago, and that he died in the Tombs three months ago; but I am afraid that will not be much consolation to you. A divorce may be obtained in Chicago for the most trivial reason, and in the most irregular fashion. Couples divorce each other there for incompatibility of temper, or, as you see, on account of the husband being arrested, and the evidence of one party only is necessary to the decree. You must perceive, therefore, what an irregular proceeding it must be. When you met Stephanie Harcourt, she was, accord-

ing to your own ideas on the subject, still the wife of Cortès, and without power to contract another alliance."

"It *cannot* be true," repeated Bernard, in a confused manner; "you must be mistaken. You are thinking of some one else."

"Can't you believe the evidence of her own letter, Freshfield? She only discovered that I had recognised her for certain yesterday afternoon, and her first act is to leave her home. Does not that prove to you that my statement must be correct?"

"You frightened her, perhaps," replied Bernard. "She is not strong, and she saw no way of coping with your testimony. I cannot accept a statement that destroys my life, on the evidence of one witness alone."

"Will you accept it on the evidence of two?" rejoined Cole. "Jack Neville, who travelled with me from New York, is staying in London. Will you hear what he has to say on the subject?"

"Who is Jack Neville?" asked Bernard in a low voice.

"He is a fellow who has been implicated in

dozens of scrapes, and burned his fingers more than once; but a sterling good fellow for all that, and one whose word you may trust to the uttermost. I only knew Stephanie Harcourt in Chicago; but he knew her in San Francisco, long before she went upon the stage. Will you come up to town with me and interview Jack with respect to her?"

"How are we to be sure that he will mean my—my— I would say, how can we be certain his description applies to Phyllida? Two women may singularly resemble each other."

"True. Take up her photograph, then, and show it to Jack yourself. I see you have a very beautiful coloured portrait of her in the drawing-room, taken in white satin and pearls. She is hardly likely to have worn white satin and pearls in Sacramento Valley. I think if you show that to Neville, and he recognizes it, notwithstanding its surroundings, to be the same woman he knew in 'Frisco, you may be satisfied also as to its identity with Stephanie Harcourt."

Bernard did not reply, but moved unsteadily towards the door.

"Where are you going, dear boy?" asked Cole.

"To London—didn't you say so?—to see this Jack Neville."

"But you won't start without your breakfast surely? You can't do it, Bernard. You will drop before you reach Westertown. You don't know what a scarecrow you look."

"Do you suppose I can eat or drink till I have satisfied my mind upon this subject? Oh, Cole, I am in hell—a raging, burning, intolerable hell! For God's sake, let me do *something*, be it only to walk along the road to Westertown, or I shall destroy myself—or you!"

"We will start as soon as it is possible to put the horses into the carriage," replied Cole soothingly. "I am ready to go with you, Bernard, to the end of the world, only you don't want all the servants and that old woman, Mrs. Penfold, to guess your business before it is concluded, do you, old fellow? You wouldn't like to think they were running open-mouthed about the village retailing it to each boor they met, and making it out worse than it need be, —eh?"

The instinctive horror of men, and especially Englishmen, to have their private affairs discussed by a party of busybodies had the desired effect, and Bernard Freshfield sank back in his chair hopeless, but resigned to follow his friend's advice.

"Let me have brandy," he articulated faintly, "and leave me alone. Don't let any prying fool come in here, Cole, for pity's sake! and make all the necessary arrangements—there's a good fellow; and tell—tell them what story you like—only let us be off as soon as possible; for this suspense is killing me."

It was a difficult task which Bernard had delegated to him; but Nelson Cole accomplished it as diplomatically as was possible. He told the servants that Mrs. Freshfield had received an urgent summons to the death-bed of a friend, and that their master was starting at once to join her. He saw that they were not taken in by the deception, but it left them, at least, nothing but conjecture to feed upon.

With Mrs. Penfold he was compelled to be more explicit. She would naturally have demanded to hear the names of people and places—perhaps even

have insisted on sharing the search they were about to make for her cousin; therefore he confided to her the fact that Phyllida's departure was wrapt in mystery, and that, for her sister's sake and her own, it would be prudent to adopt the fable he had invented for the benefit of the servants' hall.

But even as he advised her, he had little hope of her adhering to his counsel. The old lady's face twitched with curiosity and the delight of a mystery; and he felt that as soon as their backs were turned, her tongue would itch until she had confided it to some one else.

Yet, after all, he thought to himself, what did it matter? There was no doubt in his own mind as to the identity of Phyllida Moss; and all the world of Bluemere must know her story before long. It was for Bernard alone that his heart bled. The women might fight it out between themselves; he thought only of his "monkish-faced boy," and how best to shield him from the scandal and trouble that had come down upon him.

As soon as the hour arrived, he got him as quickly into the carriage as he could, and drove

him with his own hands to Westertown; thence to London, and to the rooms in the Strand temporarily occupied by Mr. Jack Neville, was, comparatively speaking, easy work. For many broken hearts and blasted hopes go travelling about the world, and pursuing their usual avocations, as though nothing were the matter with them, to render the presence of one silent and abstracted man in a railway carriage any matter for curiosity to the rest of the passengers.

They found Mr. Jack at home, doing the *dolce far niente* after a night of debauch—careless, handsome, and *insouciant*, as if he were still in San Francisco—and lying on two chairs with a pipe in his mouth.

“Wake up, Jack, my boy!” was Cole’s first salutation to him. “My friend here, Bernard Freshfield, and I have come up to town on an unpleasant business, and we want your assistance.”

“What is it?” cried Jack, suddenly becoming animated; “disagreeable, eh? sorry to hear it. Is it a robbery, or a forgery, or an arrest? Any way, I’m at your service.”

"I knew that before you said it, old chap. It's something worse than all three put together, Jack. It's a woman!"

Jack whistled, but made no further remark, except asking them if they had lunched, or if they wouldn't sit down.

"Well, we can talk as well sitting as standing," replied Cole, taking a chair; "but my friend, here, is rather anxious to see this business concluded, and so, to tell the truth, am I. And now, Freshfield, I think you'd better open fire by producing that photograph. I wish Jack to take it from your hands rather than mine."

Bernard, with a face that had assumed a stern rather than a sad expression, now that he was under the scrutiny of a stranger, produced a parcel which he was carrying, and which, being untied, revealed an exquisitely painted photograph of the woman he had called his wife. He placed it in silence before Neville.

"Tell us who that is, Jack?" said Nelson Cole.

Jack looked at the portrait a moment, then clapped his hand upon his thigh.

"By George! it's herself!" he exclaimed. "How did you get this? Where was it taken? I wish I had a cool thou. laid on the chances of my picking out her face from that of any other woman in the world. She was always a little stunner; and, by Jove! how handsome she's grown, and what a swell she looks! Rather different from her appearance after that last night in Chicago—eh, Cole?"

"Don't talk rubbish," cried the other, impatiently. "I asked you to tell me whose portrait it is."

"Get out!" returned Jack; "you know as well as I do. It's little Nessie Macpherson, of Sacramento Valley."

"That—that isn't the name you mentioned," said Bernard hurriedly, to Nelson Cole.

"No, it isn't; but it will lead to it. Tell us where you met Nessie, Jack, and where she went to, and all you may know about her; not for *my* satisfaction, you understand, but for that of my friend."

"Oh, certainly, with the greatest pleasure!" replied Jack, pushing the portrait away from him. "Only look here!—she hasn't got into a scrape, has

she? You're not going to ask me to peach upon a woman?"

"Don't be afraid of that. She *has* got into a scrape (or rather she's got my friend into one); but it's nothing in which the truth can hurt her. So fire away, Jack, and be quick about it."

The three men drew their chairs together, Bernard sitting between the others, like the ghost of Banquo at the feast of Macbeth.

"I met Nessie first in San Francisco," commenced Neville. "I tried my luck at the gold diggings there, and her father, Macpherson, who is one of the greatest rascals living"—(*The very greatest*, d—n him!" interposed Cole)—"kept a sort of public house there, which was, in point of fact, a gambling hell, and Nessie used to serve at the bar. I think I noticed her more because she was so young—only sixteen—to place in such a position than because she was so pretty. And Sandie Macpherson ill-treated her into the bargain. There wasn't a digger in the Valley that didn't feel for the child."

Freshfield groaned, but he said nothing.

"Go on; cut it short," was the practical remark of Cole.

"I got into a scrape up there after a while—one of my numerous awkward jobs, you know, Cole—and had to run down South till the breeze had blown over. There was a nasty fellow there at the time, called Fernan Cortès, whom none of us liked, and he was implicated in the affair; in fact, *I* had had to bear the brunt of his knavery. Naturally, the first thing I did on my return was to look up my friend to have it out with him, but I found he had mizzled from Sacramento Valley, and taken Nessie Macpherson with him. The father declared she was an obstinate hussy, and *would* marry Cortès; but I heard a very different story from the diggers. They told me there had been a fight up at Macpherson's one day with a stranger, who declared he had been cheated at the tables, and that Sandie had held him down whilst Cortès knived him, and Nessie had been witness to the affair, and threatened to expose it. So then her father forced her to marry this Cortès—they can do anything they choose with a rough disorderly band like that—

and packed her off with him, lest she should turn witness against them. I'm not sure if that's the real truth of the matter. I only tell it you as it was told to me."

"But where did you meet Nessie next, Jack? That's the most important thing."

"Why, in Chicago, where she was acting on the stage under the name of Stephanie Harcourt."

"You hear that, old fellow," said Cole to Bernard; "am I right or wrong?"

"Let Mr. Neville go on, Cole. I have no hope left."

"I had just come from New York then, having made the Valley a bit too hot to hold me again, and Fernan Cortés was arrested for forgery whilst I was there, and condemned to two years' imprisonment in the Tombs. I inquired after his wife in the city, but I couldn't hear anything of her, so I was all the more surprised to recognise her pretty face on the Chicago stage. Of course I found out her address—I wish to goodness now that I hadn't—and went off to carry her the news of her husband's arrest. I never saw a poor girl so delighted

in my life; it was as if she had been condemned to death, and I had been the bearer of a free pardon. She went right off her head, and was like a mad creature. Then I was fool enough to give her a dinner at one of the swell restaurants there, and ply her with champagne—without any idea, of course, except that of keeping up her spirits, but it proved too much for her, and she was dismissed from the theatre that evening. I daresay Cole has told you that part of the story, Mr. Freshfield, and I need not recapitulate. Nessie left Chicago, and I have heard nothing of her since, until you placed her portrait in my hand. And what the dickens is she doing now?"

"Worse than she ever did in all her life before, Neville. We owe you some explanation after giving you all this trouble, and I know you may be trusted with my friend's secret. I knew this girl under the name of Stephanie Harcourt at Chicago. I felt interested in her, as I suppose most men would do if only on account of her beauty, and when Evans dismissed her from the theatre I visited her, and sent her sufficient money to enable her to leave the

city. What was my astonishment, on going to see my friend Freshfield the other day at Bluemere—a clergyman, and a man of property and standing in the county—you won't credit me, Jack, but it's sacred truth I'm telling you—what was my amazement at finding that girl established at Briarwood *as his wife.*”

“Heaven and earth!” cried Neville, starting from his seat. “What! Nessie Macpherson, the daughter of old Sandie, a parson's wife? It's impossible.”

“It *is* possible, my boy, and if I had died in America, she would have probably gone on to the end without detection. But I recognised her at once, and when she found it was the case, she cut and run.”

“Best thing she could do,” remarked Jack sententiously; “she's a nice little thing, but as for sticking up to be any man's *wife*, and a parson's above all men—O Lord—”

“*Don't,*” ejaculated Bernard in a voice of pain; and then he added in a very gentle but manly manner, “Mr. Neville, I daresay I must appear to

you in the light only of a very easily taken in fool; but you must remember that this—this lady came to Bluemere under a feigned name to stay with respectable people, and I had no means of ascertaining her antecedents. I—I—loved her and believed in her. Tell me all therefore that it is necessary I should know; but don't say more, at least till I am gone, for I am scarcely strong enough yet to bear it."

There was such bitter unmistakable suffering imprinted on his features that the best part of Jack Neville's nature was aroused. He held out his hand to Bernard, with a firm friendly grasp,—

"I was thoughtless," he said, "and I beg your pardon. That you have been easily deceived by her, Mr. Freshfield, is no blot upon your character, it rather redounds to your credit. I wouldn't give you twopence for the man whom a pretty woman can't take in. But I think now I have told you all that I can about the girl whose portrait this is, and who is without doubt the same that I knew under the names of Nessie Macpherson and Stephanie Harcourt. And what shall you do now about it?"

"She has left me. I do not believe her to be my wife. There is nothing left for me to do except to bear it as best I may," said Bernard, in a broken voice.

"Shall you return to Bluemere?" demanded Nelson Cole.

"Certainly; because I have suffered a terrible shock is no reason that my people should suffer also. My duty lies in Bluemere. I had better return at once. And I carry one consolation with me, my conscience is at rest; I have not wronged her."

"I had better return with you, Bernard," said Cole anxiously.

"As you will, dear old chum; but it is not necessary—in fact I would rather go alone. I must learn to fight with this grief that has come so suddenly upon me, and which is far worse than death. After a while, perhaps, if I hear nothing, I will ask you to make some inquiries for me. She must not want, you know; but for the present, I feel stunned and unable to think. Let me go home at once, Cole; I am like a wounded animal, that wants to get out of the light and die alone."

"All right, Bernard," replied Cole, "you shall do exactly as you think best. After a few days you shall be better able to decide for yourself. For the present I will remain with Neville. To-morrow or next day, if you wish it, I will rejoin you at Briarwood, for I shouldn't like to leave England again, dear boy, without another shake of the hand from you. And keep up your pluck, old fellow. Remember there are as good fish in the sea as any that came out of it."

Bernard shook his head with a sad smile; but he bade them farewell gratefully, and walked downstairs again as miserable a man as existed in all England.

His friends talked very differently of Miss Stephanie Harcourt as soon as his back was turned.

"Fine fellow that," commenced Jack Neville. "I like his cut. He's straight as a rule. I can read it in his eye."

"You'd say so if you knew him," replied Cole. "His only fault is being a parson. That man would as soon shoot his own mother as do a mean or dishonourable action. But how he can have been so

green as to be taken in by that little jade beats me altogether."

"Nessie's awfully pretty," remonstrated his companion, "and when she's well dressed, she looks a thorough lady. Not that I often saw her in San 'Frisco."

"Jack, my boy, I never knew, till I heard you tell the fact to Freshfield, that you had been such a long time in Sacramento. You must have known that old devil Sandie Macpherson for several years. Did you ever see or hear of a person named Summers, who was connected with him there?"

"Summers! Summers!" said Jack reflectively. "Let me see. Do you mean a man?"

"No—a woman!"

"Young?"

"No," replied Nelson Cole, as curtly as before, "middle-aged."

"Why do you want to know?"

"What's that to you, my son?"

"True. However, I don't remember the name. I knew a lot of women there, but I can't recall any one of the name of Summers."

Nelson Cole smoked in silence for a few minutes as though he were making up his mind to some mighty effort—then he said suddenly,—

“Jack, had Macpherson (curse him) any one living with him whilst you were there?”

“He had his wife,” replied Neville innocently. But he was startled by the tornado of passion his words roused in his companion.

“*Wife!*” he exclaimed vehemently, dashing his pipe upon the ground; “he had no wife. He lied if he said so. The woman who lived with him was only another of his victims, and rather a more wronged and helpless victim than the rest. Macpherson stole her—the cowardly scoundrel—as he stole the money of men and their reputations and their lives.”

“My dear Cole, don’t put yourself into such a white heat on the matter. What was the woman to you? Did you know her?”

Cole paused to wipe the beads of perspiration from his forehead before he answered,—

“Yes, I did know her—years and years ago, and I knew her husband too, poor devil—and what

he suffered when she left him, and I have sworn that, whenever Sandie Macpherson and I meet face to face, I will avenge his wrongs. She was a good and true wife to him, Jack (to my friend, you understand), until she met that devil Macpherson, and he led her astray—the arch fiend alone knows by what means—for he is one of the ugliest dogs that was ever created.”

“You may well say that, Cole. He can never have been handsome at any time, with his freckled face and red hair, and what he used to look like in a digger’s costume with a beard to his waist, you may just imagine. He always went by the name of Sandie the Devil amongst the diggers, and well he deserved it. But this woman you speak of. Can it have been Mrs. Moss?”

“*Moss*—Moss; that is a coincidence, Jack. Stephanie Harcourt went by the name of Phyllida Moss when she came to England! It was under that name she married poor Freshfield.”

“Was it? Well, I conclude she took the idea from her mother.”

"Was Mrs. Moss the mother of Stephanie?" asked Cole, with visible agitation.

"I have been always told so. But she is dead, as perhaps you know. She died when Nessie was fourteen or fifteen—about a year before this iniquitous marriage was brought about with that brute Cortès."

"She is dead, is she?" said Cole slowly. "Well, if she was the woman I mean, I am glad to hear it. Dead! escaped from his clutches—gone to a more merciful gaoler. Thank Heaven for her release! Poor Agnes."

"That was her name, I know," interposed Neville. "I have heard Macpherson call her by the name of Agnes over and over again."

"And what was she like, Jack?" said Cole eagerly; "describe her to me as well as you can. Let me be sure that it is my—my—poor friend's wife that lies at rest at last."

"She was a tall, slight woman—if you are speaking of Mrs. Moss—with dark eyes and hair—"

"Yes, yes; go on, my lad, go on!" cried the other hastily.

"A great quantity of hair that fell down to her

waist, and small hands and feet; and a French accent, and—”

“It was she, without doubt; it was poor Agnes whom you knew. But why did she call herself Moss instead of Macpherson?”

“That I cannot tell you. I thought perhaps it was because Macpherson himself was in such evil odour in California, and so often in scrapes, that she preferred—like some American women—to keep her maiden name; and it is quite certain that Nessie was never styled Macpherson till after her mother’s death. You see Mrs. Moss was a sort of protection to the girl; but when she was removed, Sandie had her entirely in his power, and a nice use he made of it.”

“Did he ill-treat her?”

“Shamefully. The whole Valley was up in arms about it. For my part, I was not surprised to hear she had run off with Cortès; I should not have been surprised to hear anything of the girl, she suffered so much from his violence.”

“Poor child! Well, it will only add another knot to the lash I have in store for that gentleman. It is

quite in accordance with the character I have heard of him that he should ill-treat his own child. I confess, Neville, that when I met you after that business in Chicago, and found that I had been assisting the daughter of my greatest enemy, I was sorry for it, and the knowledge of whose child she is made me sterner perhaps with her the other day than I need have been; but now that you tell me she is only another of his victims, I will try and forget she is his flesh and blood."

"But, my dear fellow, I don't know that she is. The general belief in Sacramento was that Nessie was *not* Macpherson's daughter."

"What do you mean, Neville?" cried Nelson Cole, starting to his feet; "not *his* daughter? Then, whose daughter could she be? Was not this Mrs. Moss her mother?"

"Oh yes; there is no doubt of that; but I imagined—I may be wrong, you know, but this was the general idea—that Mrs. Moss had been married twice, and that Nessie was her child by the first marriage. Any way, she was several weeks old, I believe, when Macpherson brought the woman he

called his wife to Sacramento; and I have been told by those who knew him then that he constantly disclaimed all relationship with Nessie. Now that you tell me that Mrs. Moss was seduced from her husband by Sandie, the thing is clear enough—Nessie must be the daughter of the man she ‘deserted.’”

“God in heaven!” cried Cole. “Why did this never strike me before?”

“I wonder it didn’t strike Mrs. Moss’s husband,” said Jack.

“Because, my dear boy, he had left his wife six months before in New York, whilst he went down South on business. And during his absence that reptile Macpherson used some of his diabolical arts by which to convince Agnes Summers that her husband was untrue to her, and she succumbed (as too many women do)—not to her passion, but to her desire of retaliation. And so her husband lost her; and so he has gone through the world since, waiting, but longing, for his revenge. And you really think that this girl is the child of—of—my friend?”

“I think it is very probable; I am sure the mother thought so, though she brought up Nessie to

look upon Macpherson as her father; but perhaps that was to avoid trouble after her death, for she was a long time dying."

"Poor Agnes!" murmured Cole thoughtfully, as he remembered the worn wedding-ring and the curious fashion in which it had reached him."

"Cole, did you say you were only waiting to meet Sandie Macpherson face to face?"

"It's true, my boy. I've tracked him from one State to another, but always missed him by a flash of lightning. He knows we have a heavy account to settle with each other, and slips through my fingers like an eel. But the day will come, Jack; sooner or later it must come."

"Perhaps it *has* come, Cole, for Sandie the Devil is in England. I saw his ugly face—clean shorn, but still his own—only last night."

"Where? where?" cried Cole, roused into sudden activity.

"He was pushing through a crowd when I caught sight of him, and I didn't attract his notice, as you may suppose. That man is my evil genius, and misfortune has always followed in his wake for me. So

I didn't stop to shake his dirty hand. But he is in London, safe and sure."

"Neville, I can't return on the 10th. This matter must be settled before I leave England. The sleepers start by the *King of the Icebergs*, and I shall telegraph to Farquharson at once that business detains me here for an indefinite period."

"Will it be wise, Cole, to let your friend's private affairs interfere with your relations with Farquharson?"

"My connection with the firm, my annual income, and every prospect I have in life, may go smash before I will give up this opportunity of settling old scores with that scoundrel. Neville, you don't know—it is impossible to tell you—the bad blood that is between us!"

"I know one thing," replied the younger man, laughing, "that you are determined to have a slap at the old hypocrite, and I wish you all success. If I could help you to smash him I should be but too glad."

"They don't allow Lynch law in this country," said Cole; "but they'll have to stand it for once in

a way if Sandie Macpherson and I cross each other's path, and they may give me six months afterwards if they will, but I'll have my revenge on him. It would be cheap at any cost."

And then having made some appointment with his friend for the evening, Nelson Cole took his way slowly downstairs with a mouth that looked as determined as a bull-dog's, and an eye that gleamed with the softness of a woman's. The one was for Sandie Macpherson, the other for Phyllida Moss.

"Poor child!" he thought, "poor ill-used child! At any rate she is *hers*, and from this time forward I will stand her friend."

CHAPTER VI.

How Bernard Freshfield reached home that day, he said afterwards that he never knew. It is supposed that he travelled by cabs and trains in the same way that happy mortals (if there are any) perform their journeys; but it was all done mechanically, and he was conscious but of one thought the while, that he was alive, and he wished that he could die.

He was a good man; but it was too soon for him to become reconciled to such an awful disappointment—the worst that had ever befallen him. He could not realise that it was true—that would have been impossible—but he kept on repeating mentally the intelligence that had been conveyed to him by Jack Neville and Nelson Cole, and wondering in a dull, stupefied way if they could be mistaken, and resolving that he would tax his wife with it, face to face, and then, waking up with a start, to remember that she was *not* his wife, and, that she was gone.

Briarwood without Phyllida! It was incredible—it would never look like the same place again—but then that was a trifle compared to the rest; *the world* would never look the same to him again, it was puerile fretting about Briarwood. As he walked home from Westertown (for he felt that when he *could* use action it was the only preservative against his going mad), he could not help comparing his feelings with those he experienced on losing his first wife. He had been very lonely then; the house had seemed like an empty mausoleum to him, and he had never entered the hall for months afterwards,

and encountered the stairs without recalling how he had watched the bearers carry Alice's coffin from her bedroom to the library, and had removed the lid to take one more look at her pale waxen face before it was hid away from him for ever. He had not loved her as he *could* love, but she had endeared herself to him, and no man can lose the woman who has been part of his life, without the loss being succeeded by a terrible sense of loneliness. But with the loneliness, however hard to bear, come rest, solitude, and silence—three strong friends to help us to cope with sorrow. In his present position, Bernard could have no such assistance, and he felt as if the first he should never know again, and the other two he could not bear. *If* she had only died, he kept on saying to himself—meaning Phyllida, of course—died with her hand in his, true and loving to the last, like his poor, forgotten Alice, he could have struggled with misfortune. But to think of her living still, though lost to him—the wife perhaps of some other man (since their union was proved to have been illegal), the thought was madness—he could not—dare not, think.

There were his people waiting for his return; his work amongst them to be punctually performed. As he strode on through the gathering darkness (for it was late in the afternoon) he told himself there was but one way in which to meet the storm that had overtaken him, and that was by work—hard, constant, faithful work—and he would try no other remedy. He had been careless, perhaps. The charm of this woman's society and ways and manners had kept him too much by her side, and caused him to neglect his humbler friends. He had provoked the Almighty to send forth His thunders and lightnings upon him. In the freshness of his grief Bernard Freshfield forgot the heart and essence of the religion to which he had ever clung; he overlooked the "All-loving," who had been to him as an actual fatherly presence, and called Him the Almighty instead. How much some women will have to answer for hereafter—the *charming* women especially, who hold the power of drawing men after them and detaining them there. A woman has but too often come between a good man and his God before Bernard Freshfield's time. But his nature

was too noble to succumb utterly to such weakness. As he entered the grounds of Briarwood it struck him, for the first time, that he should have to give some explanation of the disappearance of Phyllida to his friends and servants. He had been too much absorbed in his own grief to think of it, and even now it troubled him but little compared with all the rest. After all, what was the shame, compared with the loss? Only he must spare her name as much as he possibly could. He let himself into the house, and walked into the library. The lamps were burning brightly, the fire had been well tended; it was evident that his servants had expected him home again. He rung the bell for Mrs. Garnett twice. That was his accustomed signal that he required her services, and he felt in his present state of mind that he could better encounter a woman than a man. The old housekeeper appeared, prim and spotless as usual, and without a sign of disturbance on her countenance.

“I am glad to see you home, sir; I was beginning to feel uneasy. The days do close in so soon now. I suppose you will take your dinner at seven as usual?”

"Yes — no —" replied Bernard incoherently. "Dinner, oh yes, of course I will. I mustn't forget Mrs. Penfold. By the way, that's what I wanted, Mrs. Garnett. Please ask Mrs. Penfold to come and speak to me here."

"But, if you please, sir, she's gone!"

"*Gone!* Where to?"

"I understood she had gone to stay with Mrs. Pinner, sir; at least she packed up her box and left word for the stable boy to take it over there on a barrer. Mrs. Penfold was very curious like and upset in her mind all the morning, sir. She kept on saying that she'd better go, and that you wouldn't like to see her here when you returned, and I thought, perhaps, there had been a sort of misunderstanding between you. But it wasn't my place to say anything, sir, so I just let her go."

"She must do as she thinks best," replied Bernard indifferently, "though there is no reason why she should not have remained at Briarwood. Any news from the village, Mrs. Garnett?" he added with a sigh.

"Well, yes, sir. As I was just saying to Edwards,

they've been coming and going all day like a hive of bees. But it was the mistress they was after, and it was no use my telling them she wouldn't be home to-night. Old William Bennett has the rheumatics very bad, and wanted some of that famous liniment; but you see, sir, I hadn't the mistress's keys to get it. Then Mrs. Sutton was taken ill, and sent up for her. As if she could be at all the labours in the village, as I told 'em. This evening, not half-an-hour ago, up comes John Wright to ask if she could step down to his little Katie, who had scalded her foot with upsetting the tea-kettle, and she kept on screaming out for Mrs. Freshfield. I sent them down a roll of cotton wool, and said that would do the child more good than the mistress, even if she had been to home. They think they can't do anything without her now, sir. It's here, there, and everywhere, they want her just for all the world as if she was their slave."

"Poor creatures! poor creatures!" groaned Bernard, as he thought how his loss would reflect on so many. His manner alarmed the housekeeper.

"I hope there's nothing wrong, sir?" she said

respectfully. "Me and Edwards have been quite in a quandary all day, what with the mistress going away so suddenly, and you too."

She was an old servant, who had served his family faithfully for many years, and he tried to tell her of his trouble, but broke down utterly in the attempt.

"There *is* something wrong," he gasped, "but don't speak to me of it yet, for I cannot bear it. Only do this for me, Garnett. You and Edwards have been more than servants to me; be my friends in this predicament, and try to hold your tongues. I—I—don't quite think she will return,—not just yet, I mean,—but you shall know all about it by-and-by. And don't worry me with dinner. Only leave me alone and undisturbed, and make the best of it you can downstairs."

The old woman curtsied to him and instantly withdrew. She had suspected the worst from the drift of Mrs. Penfold's lamentations, and the alacrity with which that lady had removed herself and her belongings from Briarwood. But the uneducated, however well-intentioned, can never leave a mystery

to *be* a mystery. They must supplement it with speculations of their own. Edwards and Garnett had already decided that as no one knew *why* Mrs. Bernard Freshfield had left her home, it was quite evident she did not go alone, and visions of mustachioed rakes, with gold-braided uniforms and swords clanking by their sides, had been floating through their minds all day. It was not the slightest obstacle to their imagination that no officers had been seen in Bluemere or its vicinity since their master's marriage.

"I always did *hate* them milling-tary," Mrs. Garnett had ejaculated, as they discussed the subject together. "I might have been married to a soldier myself; but I thank the Lord I wasn't; for I've heard since as they're the ficklest and poorest and most trumperious lot. Poor Garnett always maintained so."

And after her interview with Bernard in the library, she was still more certain that a "nasty soldier" must be at the bottom of his undisguised misery, though she and Edwards were both too faithful to his interests to do more than whisper their suspicions in each other's ear. In the servants'

hall they declared—and, let us hope, were forgiven for the pious lie—that the master had been with the mistress all day; but as she was nursing her own aunt by the father's side, and the complaint was not infectious, he had given his leave for her to stay away as long as she was required.

“And I'm afraid it will be some time before we see the mistress back again,” added Mrs. Garnett (not content with having told a lie and done with it); “for *I* know what her poor, dear aunt lies ill of, and it's a disease as will never rest till it's carried her off. And how I'm to satisfy all these poor people as come hollering after the mistress, whilst she's away, the Lord only knows. Buf if any of you jades go to disturb the master in the libbery or elsewhere,” cried Mrs. Garnett, with a sudden change of manner, “you'll lose your places. He's got more than enough to think of and manage, poor, dear gentleman, with the whole parish visiting thrown on his hands. So you mind what I say, and keep down here in your proper places, or it will be the worse for you.”

Meanwhile Bernard remained in the library, in

silent torture, with his face buried in his hands, trying to disentangle the confused thoughts that tripped each other up as they rushed helter-skelter through his brain; to reduce the chaos into order—to remember exactly *what* had happened to him, and to decide what influence it would exert upon his future. He had one especially hard task before him—to tell the truth to his mother. He felt he must tell it; that it was due to her and to Laura that they should hear of the disgrace that had fallen on the family, through his means, from his own lips. He did not know how much or how little of the news had already circulated through Bluemere. Mrs. Penfold's sudden departure seemed as though she was aware of it; it would never do for it to reach Blue Mount by a stranger's hand. He pulled out pen and paper at once, and wrote hurriedly; but his letter was addressed not to Mrs. Freshfield,—but to Laura.

“MY DEAREST SISTER,—A terrible blow has fallen upon me, which you must not hear from any one but myself. Phyllida has left me. She was never

my wife. She was a married woman when she came to England, and Cole (who knew her in America) recognised her directly they met. Break this news to my poor mother as gently as you can, and talk about it as little as possible. And whatever you do, don't come to Briarwood, for I cannot speak on this subject nor see any one, at all events for the present.—Ever your affectionate brother,

BERNARD."

He sealed his letter and dispatched it by a groom, and then he went up to the chamber which Phyllida had occupied and locked himself in, and spent the night amidst the relics of his lost love, with which it was strewn. She had taken nothing away with her apparently, except the plain serge dress she wore. All the costly fabrics he had taken such delight in purchasing for her—the delicate silks and satins; the sable trimmed and velvet mantles; the lace and jewellery that had excited the indignation of her mother-in-law—were all there. She had left them behind her seemingly with the utmost indifference, and gone forth into the fog and

the darkness, unprovided and alone. Even her purse containing the money with which he supplied her for the parish needs—"Judas's bag," as the poor child had laughingly called it)—lay on the toilet table, and Bernard took it up mechanically and counted the contents. A five-pound note, two sovereigns, and seven shillings in silver. What had Phyllida taken with her? he thought in a dazed manner; by what means did she intend to provide for herself in the future? But even such speculations did not cause any feelings of tenderness or compassion towards her. His whole heart was hardened by the blow it had received; he would not remember that she had been the wife of his bosom; he thought of her only as the woman who had deceived him and brought him to shame, who had been deceiving all her life (so his curdled nature was ready to believe), and who would go on deceiving till she died. He was rough even with the poor things she had left behind her, and kicked such as lay in his way to one side with his foot—a very different mode of procedure to the tenderness with which he had handled the reminiscences of the dead girl whom he

had never loved with one tithe of the passion which was even then raging in his breast. Violent emotions must have their violent counterparts. The deceived lover who can bless and pardon, has ceased to regret the infidelity he so readily condones, and a woman need never desire a better compliment from an old admirer than when he refuses to meet her altogether. She may rely that he feels himself too weak to bear her presence, or too strong: too full of regret for the past, or too angry with the present. When lovers become friends, the passion of love has expended itself. Had Phyllida entered Bernard's presence at that moment, he might have killed her.

Meanwhile, it is impossible to describe the consternation with which his news was received at Blue Mount. Had he written to say that Phyllida had dropped down dead, it could not have surprised and shocked poor Laura more. She had grown so fond of her sister-in-law, they had become so confidential and friendly together, and read so much of each other's hearts and minds, that the revelation was as ghastly as though she had been told that her mother,

whom she honoured above all women, had led a life of iniquity and sin.

Phyllida already married, and not to Bernard! Living at Briarwood, and making every one so happy there, and showing such a bright, sweet example to all who went to her for comfort or advice, and yet *not* Bernard's wife—the wife of some other man! Oh, it was incredible—*it could not be!* Bernie's mind must have been led astray by some diabolical arts; his friend Nelson Cole must be mistaken, or mad—or—or—anything, sooner than she could credit that Phyllida was not as good and pure as she seemed.

The dear, brave girl read her painful letter and kept the secret, hugging it to her breast as the Spartan boy concealed the fox that preyed upon his vitals—taking it out in the night, and perusing the horrible sentences it contained again and again, but still remaining steadfast to her first idea—that the thing was impossible.

She did not heed Bernard's injunction that he would not be disturbed either by her mother or herself, but slipped out of the house as soon as breakfast was over the following morning, and made

her way to Briarwood without breathing a word of her intention to Mrs. Freshfield. She opened the hall-door (doors are generally kept upon the latch in country places), and without ceremony entered the library. There sat her brother at his writing-table, pale, hollow-eyed, and stern, but still occupied just as usual with his parish papers. His greeting to Laura was not a genial one,—

“I thought I desired you not to come here,” he said gravely.

“I know you did, dear, dear Bernie; but how do you suppose I could obey such an order? I received your note—I need not tell you that; but I have not said a word about it to mamma.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t believe what you wrote to me: because I think you must be labouring under some terrible delusion, and I want to see if it cannot be cleared away again.”

“It is not a delusion; it can never be cleared away. You might have taken my word for it,” replied her brother.

“No, Bernie, I cannot. I must hear everything

about it, from beginning to end. I want to know what Mr. Cole said, and why he said it, and what it was that frightened dear Phyllida away? Oh, Bernie, I love her so dearly—she is like my own sister to me. I cannot give her up at a moment's notice, and on the condemnation of a man who is a perfect stranger to me."

"Oh, Laura, you might have spared me this ordeal," groaned Bernard, with his face buried in his hands. "I tell you there is no mistake—it is but too true—and the fact that directly she was taxed with her crime, she fled from my protection, is sufficient proof that she knew it to be true."

"Who taxed her with it?"

"Nelson Cole. He knew her in America, under the name of Harcourt."

"Bernie, I hate this Nelson Cole. What does he mean by coming as a welcomed guest into such a happy family as ours, and spreading misery and dissension amongst us in this way?"

"You don't know what you are talking of, Laura. You cannot understand such a matter. No *man*, who is worthy of the name, could see his friend the

dupe of an artful *intrigante*, without opening his eyes to his disgrace."

"Bernard, how *dare* you speak of Phyllida by such a name?" replied his sister boldly; "if *you* can forget in so short a time all she has been to you, *I* cannot. An *intrigante*! I would as soon believe myself to be one."

"Oh, Laurie, Laurie, you don't know how much harder you are making all this for me to bear. Yesterday I would have said the same as yourself—to-day I cannot. But don't think that I would not blot out the conviction (if I could) with my heart's blood. God knows, I would die ten thousand deaths to restore Phyllida to the place she once held in my estimation."

"And so would I, darling; so would I," cried the warm-hearted Laura, "and do you think it possible that a *bad* woman would have been able to gain such power over us as that? Do you imagine that a deceitful, lying adventuress (such as Mr. Nelson Cole would wish us to believe dear Phyllida to be) could change all at once to the sweet, loving, sympathising soul who made herself the good angel of

Bluemere? Why, brother, the people simply worship her. And you have let your fine American friend drive her away."

"She went of her own accord," sighed poor Bernard; "besides, no sophistry nor arguments can alter facts, and the fact remains—she was a married woman."

"To whom was she married?"

"Oh, what does it matter? to some low ruffian in the States; or rather she was divorced from him (but you know how I regard divorce), when she was cruel enough to go through the farce of wedding me."

"Is her husband dead since then?"

"Yes. He died some months ago."

"Then you can marry her over again," cried Laura confidently.

"Laura, of what are you thinking? Marry a woman who laid herself out to deceive me. Who lived here for six months with a secret that was eating out her very heart, and never disclosed it to her husband, who sat at my table and smiled in my face—"

"Yes, and who brought sunshine into your heart

despite the canker in her own; who could make the poor happy whilst she suffered herself; who could watch by the bedside of the sick whilst she wanted comfort and consolation most of all. My poor, brave Phyllida; my dear, sweet sister. If everybody else turns against her, I will search the world until I have found her, and thanked her for all the love she showed to us."

But Bernard turned away from Laura with offended dignity. How hard it is to knock his pride out of the very best of Englishmen. It is an integral part of himself. The poor man shows it as openly as the rich, and both are rather proud of being proud than otherwise. Bernard Freshfield's heart was burning to relieve itself by tears; the mention of Phyllida's virtues touched him to the very quick; but he would not give way to the weakness of allowing any part of her to be good. *She had deceived him*, that was quite sufficient.

"I should be sorry that my mother should hear you speak in such a manner, Laura," he said gravely. "Whatever my — my — I mean whatever Phyllida was in Bluemere she can never be again,

and she would never have been had her antecedents been honestly revealed to us. Cole knew her as a burlesque actress on the American stage, and—and—not always as quietly conducted as she should have been even there.”

“How *mean* of him to tell, even if he *did* know,” replied the girl with flashing eyes. “But I don’t believe it, and I won’t; and even if she *were* an actress, does that make her good deeds the less to be admired? It makes them a thousand times more valuable. It is not often a woman gives up all the excitement and gaiety of professional life to be the Lady Bountiful of an out-of-the-way village, and dispense liniments and bandages to the poor. You have made Phyllida rise instead of sink in my estimation by that announcement, Bernard, *I* can tell you.”

But the rock had not yet been smitten by the rod that should make the waters flow.

“It would be well if we all possessed so staunch a little advocate as yourself in our troubles, Laura,” he answered with a sickly smile; “but I must really ask you now to leave me. I have a lot of business

on hand, and I am not in very good form for working."

"Bernard, where is Phyllida?"

"I cannot tell you. Why will you continue to mention a name which you must know is agony for me to hear?"

"But you don't expect me to drop it for ever, brother, surely? A person can't come in and go out of our lives again in this fashion without leaving some trace behind. When are you going after her?"

"*Never!*" he said resolutely.

"I don't believe it."

"You must believe what you choose, Laura. It is impossible for you to read my heart. I can only tell you what is written there. And one thing is, that Phyllida Moss and I will never meet in this world again."

"Then I don't envy your chances of meeting her in the next," said his sister defiantly; "an unforgiving spirit will be, I should imagine, about the last to enter heaven."

"Laura, will you be good enough to leave me to

myself? You are increasing my torture to a degree of which I could not have believed you capable."

"What am I to say to mother, then?"

"Tell her the truth."

"Yes; when I know what *is* the truth."

"I have already told you; I have nothing more to say."

"It will be a grand opportunity for mamma, certainly," continued Laura, hoping by sarcasm to rouse her brother into action, "for she is going to hold a regular levee of saints next week, and they will be as happy tearing poor Phyllida's character to shreds as your kennel over a defunct sheep. Miss Janet's brother, the Laird o' Muckheep, is once more standing on his native heather, and she has volunteered a visit for all three of them to Blue Mount. It will be a sort of universal jubilee. I believe mamma entertains flattering hopes that the pious laird may take a fancy to transplant me to Barrick-gallagas Castle; and now that Phyllida is out of the way for good and all, Miss Bella may yet have a chance of reigning at Briarwood—the news will just reach them in time. I expect we shall

have meetings called for praise and thanksgiving every day."

"Laura, Laura, you are going too far," said poor Bernard, writhing under the lashes she gave him.

"I shall never have gone far enough until I have found Phyllida again," was the girl's parting shot, as she ran hurriedly from the room, lest she should break down under the crushing disappointment she felt. She was to tell her mother then—there was no help for it—and she would have to undergo the purgatory of hearing the name which had become so dear to her, vilified and abused in every possible way. How Miss Janet would hold forth on "carnal procleevities;" how Bella would blink her sandy eyelashes, and pull down the corners of her coarsely-moulded mouth, and profess to be too much shocked to take part in the conversation. How the hateful laird (for Laura hated the laird before she had seen him) would thank God he was not as other men are, and her infatuated mother would chime in and agree with everything they said, and think them the most pious people she had ever met.

Well, what must be, must be; but though she

was a brave young woman, Laura Freshfield felt that she would dearly like to have some one to help her in breaking the news to her mother; some one to stand between herself and the inevitable storm; some one to make the best of things, not only at Blue Mount but at Briarwood. And feeling thus, her thoughts seem to go naturally (as it were) to Charles Anderson, Bernard's greatest friend, and a man to whom he would listen, perhaps, sooner than to any other, because he had strong religious feelings, and had given up his best prospects in life for the sake of his faith. Mr. Anderson was resident in London; but our young lady was quite equal to dispatching a telegram to his address; and the same afternoon he appeared at Blue Mount. Laura contrived to receive him alone (indeed Mrs. Freshfield always shirked the young Catholic's presence, from dread of social contamination), and in a few minutes she had put him in possession of the terrible story.

"Go over to Briarwood and tell Bernie what to do," she said, in conclusion; "he will take your advice, Charlie, when he would listen to that of no

other. He thinks so highly of your discretion and powers of judgment."

"He flatters me, Laura," replied Anderson, "and you have set me a very difficult task, yet I will do my best for your sake and Bernard's; but what *can* I say to him?"

"Charlie, wasn't their marriage sacred?"

"Of course, my dear Laura, all marriages are sacred; but in this case you see—"

"Oh, I am not speaking of its legality," she interrupted hastily; "I know, of course, that the marriage ceremony would have to be performed over again; but I am speaking of their hearts. They truly loved each other. Bernie used to say theirs was a perfect union; that they were in reality *one*. How can anything that occurred *before* that marriage destroy its sacred unity?"

"It is a hard question to answer, Laura; you must give me time to think over it."

"I cannot do that. You must either go over to Briarwood at once, or break this dreadful intelligence to mamma; for I tremble at every ring at the bell lest it should bring some visitor open-mouthed to

inform her of it. But *do* go to Bernie first. He would hardly speak to me this morning; but to you he may confide something that will soften the blow to mamma."

"I can refuse you nothing, Laura," replied Mr. Anderson, as he prepared to start for Briarwood.

CHAPTER VII.

HE reached Briarwood at dusk, and found his friend Bernard still in the library, professing to read and write, but in reality doing nothing but stare into vacancy. He had not moved from his seat all day, nor taken any nourishment. The fire was nearly out; the lamps were unlighted; the desolation of the apartment bespoke the corresponding feeling in the owner's heart.

"This is kind of you, Charlie," he said languidly, as Anderson took his hand, but he never rose from his seat to welcome him; "how did you hear the news? I can see you *have* heard it from your face; surely it is not in possession of the newspapers yet?"

"No, no, Bernard, no such thing; don't talk non-

sense. I came down to Bluemere on receipt of a telegraphic message from your good little sister, who has an idea that the presence of an old and very true friend may prove some comfort to you in this trouble."

"Nothing can comfort me, Charlie, and no one. It is a wound past cure. The sooner I bleed to death the better."

"Yes," said Anderson reflectively, "and meanwhile, what is to become of your profession and your parish and your people?"

"I need have no fear for them," replied Bernard. "They could not fall into worse hands than mine. I have been altogether wrong from beginning to end. I see it more plainly now than I have ever done."

"Indeed, this is news to me. I imagined that you and Bluemere were on excellent terms with one another, and that everything in the parish was working smoothly and well. How long is it since you found out it is altogether wrong?"

"Since she left me!" burst out Bernard passionately; "since she took all the sunshine and hope of life away with her, and made me the most

miserable man upon earth. It is she who has done it all, Anderson; I swear it. We were—we were so happy together, and now there is nothing before me but a wretched blank. I feel as if I were going to the devil, and it won't be her fault if I *don't* go there."

"Bernard, you shock me," said Anderson, "and make me feel more strongly than ever how wise is our Church in prohibiting the marriage of her priests. A woman—one single woman turns out to be something different from what you expected her to be, and everything in consequence—your vows, your professsion, your people, and your prayers—are to look after themselves, or worse. I couldn't have believed it of you."

"I know what you would tell me," replied Bernard wildly, "that God is left, and whatever happens, He is always ours, and I know it—*I know it!* but oh, Charlie, old boy, He is behind a cloud. I cannot see Him or hear Him, or feel His hand; and I am going mad. I know I am. I am going out of my senses with grief and longing and fear."

And throwing his head suddenly down upon his

outstretched arms, Bernard Freshfield gave way to one of those storms of emotion which men sometimes indulge in, and cried as violently at if he had been a child. His friend did not attempt to check him; on the contrary, he left his seat and walked round the room, professing to examine the pictures and ornaments, until Bernard should have had time to recover himself. But, by-and-by, whilst the parson was still catching his breath in the convulsive manner that succeeds passionate weeping, he felt a kind, warm hand laid on his, which, without looking up, he grasped between both of his own.

"Charlie, dear old fellow," he sobbed, "you have always been like a brother to me, but this is an ill you cannot cure."

"I don't profess even to *try* to do so, dear Bernard," said Anderson; "but perhaps it may be ameliorated. When you feel strong enough for the task I want you to tell me all the rights and wrongs of it."

"There *are* no rights—it is all wrongs," groaned the unfortunate husband, "and it has humiliated me

as nothing else on earth could have done. Fancy, Charlie, *me*, with my grand ideas of the sanctity of marriage, the greatest human sacrament in existence—the institution of God for the regeneration of mankind by a dual existence—taken in, duped, dishonoured by the woman whom I had made part of my very life. But I see it all now; my eyes are open. I worshipped her instead of the God who made her, and I am justly punished for my sin. But oh, if the Lord had but adopted some other means by which to empty the vials of His wrath upon me.”

“Bernard, did your wife—”

“Don’t call her by that name. She is *not* my wife.”

“If I understood your sister rightly, she believed herself to be your wife, and you believed her to be so, therefore I think she has every claim to the name. However, I will call her Mrs. Freshfield. You will at least not refuse to grant her the courtesy which is accorded to those women who assume her position, knowing it to be such.”

Bernard groaned, but answered nothing.

"When Mrs. Freshfield left Briarwood, she surely gave an explanation of her actions to some one."

"She left a note behind her for me."

"May I ask what was in it, Bernard?"

The parson unlocked a drawer in his writing-table, and taking thence a half sheet of paper, threw it across to his friend.

"You can read it if you like. There it is."

Anderson took the note in his hands and examined it closely; when he had finished the perusal, he simply raised his eyes and fixed them on those of his companion.

"Well," said Bernard, in a tone of voice as though he defied him to find any excuse for Phyllida in that.

"Well," echoed Anderson, "have you read this letter, Bernard?"

"Of course I have read it."

"More than once? When you have been calm enough to decipher its meaning?" persisted his friend.

"I don't know what you're driving at, Charlie. The words are plain enough—no one can misunderstand them."

"I should have thought so, too, but it appears I am mistaken. May I read it to you?"

"If you will, but I don't see the use of it."

Anderson, not heeding the grumbling remonstrance, commenced to read,—

"Bernard, by the time this reaches you, your friend will have told you all he knows about me; and you will have learned how much you have been deceived."

"There, you see what she says herself," interrupted Freshfield. "She acknowledges I was grossly deceived."

"How could she do otherwise, poor girl?" replied Anderson; "the question is, how far she was deceived herself. Her words tell how deeply she felt for you."

"But oh, my darling, don't fret about it. I will never disgrace you more. I am going away where you will never hear of me. Only try to forget everything about me, *excepting*"—read, Anderson, slowly and emphatically—"excepting that I *loved you very dearly*, and had not *strength* to do what I *ought* to have done. But indeed—indeed, I believed myself to be your wife."

"Does she say that?" asked Freshfield quickly, as Anderson came to a full stop.

"Does she say that? Of course she does. I thought you told me just now that you had read the letter."

"So I did, when I first received it, but it was such an awful blow to me, my head was all in a whirl; and then I had to go with Cole to London and see a fellow called Neville, who had known her in the lowest possible position, and oh, Charlie," continued Bernard, breaking down again, "if you had heard what they had to tell me, you would never talk of there being any hope again."

"Bernard, old fellow, confide the very worst to me. You know I am to be trusted, and I cannot advise you unless I hear it. What are the most serious charges these gentlemen bring against Mrs. Freshfield?"

"That she is the daughter of some low ruffian who kept a gambling saloon in Sacramento Valley."

"Well, that is unfortunate; but it is not her fault, and it has certainly left no traces on her behaviour. What next?"

"She was married at sixteen to a man who turned out to be a criminal, Anderson, a forger, and got two years' imprisonment in a New York gaol; and, meanwhile, Phyllida, who was on the stage—fancy the stage for *my wife*, Charlie! (he interpolated with a shudder)—got an irregular divorce from the brute, and came to England and married me,—*I*, who do not believe in any kind of divorce; and had I known her antecedents, would have avoided her even as a friend."

"I thought you considered yourself a broad-minded man," said Anderson; "however, let that pass. Did Mrs. Freshfield consider her divorce to be complete, from a moral as well as a legal point of view?"

"I suppose she did, from what she says here."

"And married you, believing herself a free woman?"

"Perhaps so; but that didn't make her free."

"Can you call to mind, Freshfield, whether in your courting days you ever questioned her as to her past? It seems strange you should have married a woman who was an absolute stranger to you."

"I am not sure if I did. I know she refused to marry me several times, and made me so mad, that I was determined to have her at all risks."

"Rather a worldly sort of proceeding that for a parson,—eh, Bernard? and one that lays the onus of such a marriage more upon your shoulders than hers. Don't you think so?"

"Oh, I don't deny I was to blame, Charlie. I am only cursing my own folly in being so easily taken in."

"I deny that you were 'taken in.' It appears to me you entered into the contract with your eyes wide open to the truth that they were not so; in fact, it suited your convenience to be hood-winked."

"I was infatuated with her," sighed Freshfield. "No woman has ever held me in such thrall as she did—"

"As she *does*, you mean. Now look here, Bernard, it seems to me the case stands thus—you meet a very pretty girl of whom you know nothing, and fall desperately in love and marry her nilly-willy. She (believing herself to be free) takes you

at your word, and you probably said that you couldn't live without her. Didn't you, now?"

"Oh, I daresay I did. She made fool enough of me for anything."

"She has certain unfortunate antecedents (I won't call them disgraceful, for they were not her fault. How could she help being married to a forger or thrown on the stage for a subsistence), and naturally, I suppose, she argues that if there is no need to disclose them, it will be the happier for both that you should remain in ignorance. It is not strict honour, you know, according to the code of rules men set down for one another—but you mustn't judge a woman's morals as you would those of our sex. They are not reared under the same method. Besides, I conclude she was in love, and everything may go to the winds for a woman when she's once thoroughly in love."

"Charlie, what are you driving at?" demanded Bernard, with open eyes.

"Nothing, my dear boy, unless you will answer me this question. Do you still love Phyllida Moss?"

A look of the deepest agony passed over the parson's face, such a look as we may suppose on the features of a man wrestling with God for pardon for some mortal sin.

"*Love her!*" he ejaculated. "God knows I love her with every fibre of my wretched heart. Oh, Anderson, that is the worst of it. I feel that I shall never cease to love her to my dying day."

"No, Bernard, that is the best and not the worst of it. If these are your feelings, the sooner you are re-united to that woman the better."

Hope flashed into Freshfield's haggard face, as the sun suddenly breaks out from behind a murky cloud. His misery had been that re-union with Phyllida seemed impossible, and when a friend suggested to him what he had not dared to whisper to himself, it seemed as if the idea would suffocate him. He pulled at his round collar as though he were choking, and rising from his seat threw open the library window. It was already dark as night, but the air was full of sound and the baying of the dogs—those dogs she had so dearly loved—was borne distinctly from the adjacent kennel. Bernard

leaned out of the open casement for a moment to recover himself, then he said in a strangely altered voice, there was so much fearful joy in it,—

“But how—*how* could that be, Anderson? If all my wishes tended to forgive her—”

“What the d—l have you got to forgive?” exclaimed Anderson suddenly. “She is the victim of an error, or twenty errors if you like, into nineteen of which you led her, and all you have to do is to follow that girl—*your wife*, mind you—the woman whom you *made* your wife by love, and confidence, and union, more surely than any bands of law can do it—and satisfy the demands of your country and your conscience by marrying her over again. If you do not, Bernard—if you cast her off now, after having nurtured her in your bosom, to wander where she will—I shall look on you as no better than a seducer.” And in his excitement Anderson walked up and down the room like a caged lion.

“But my profession—my people,” stammered Bernard. “Can I bring her here again to reign in Bluemere, where every labourer’s child will have heard her history?”

“Don’t bring her here, then; you are an independent man. Take her anywhere that seems best to you. You have not married your people, but you *have* married her, and your first duty is towards her. What do you suppose it will benefit you to appear before the Almighty with five thousand converts shining like jewels in your crown, whilst the one soul you have sworn to protect and cherish is damned for everlasting, through the cowardice which would prevent your bearing the shame of your mutual error before the world?”

“Damned! my Phyllida! Oh, God forbid,” cried Bernard, with the tears running down his cheeks. “May He condemn me to the very nethermost hell if I neglect any means by which to save her soul. But, Charlie, I took the vows of ordination as well as those of marriage. Can I keep both?”

“I see no obstacle to it, old friend. It may not be advisable to continue your work here, but there is work waiting for you all over the world, wherever there are fellow-creatures to be taught and souls to be saved.”

“Charlie, you have given me fresh life,” cried

the parson, seizing his friend's hand; "this is what I longed to do, but feared lest the desire alone was a temptation of the devil. But you have cleared the mists from my brain. I can see God once more, not as the stern judge, condemning my folly, but the loving Father who pities it, and holds out His hand once more for me to grasp, as I grasp yours."

"Keep fast hold of it, Bernard, and you cannot go wrong. And now, if you will take my advice, you will send me back to Blue Mount to break the intelligence to your mother."

"Will it be necessary to tell her? Laura thought not."

"Laura, in her love for you, thinks only of what will save you pain. I am sure it is necessary, Bernard, for two reasons. One is because concealment must lead to deception, and deception is wrong; the other, that in order to thoroughly clear your wife's character, everybody must know of the second marriage. You cannot keep this matter an entire secret. Little things will leak out here and there; and unless you are perfectly open, the next

thing you will hear is, that you were never married at all. Let me tell Mrs. Freshfield that as you have discovered that your wife was a divorced woman at the time of your marriage, you consider it necessary to have the ceremony performed over again and she has left Bluemere until it can be accomplished. This will be the truth (if not all the truth), and will be putting, I think, as good a construction upon the matter as we can."

"Charlie, you are a true, good friend!" exclaimed Bernard. "Your visit has raised me from the very depths of human misery to the hope of renewed happiness. My Phyllida, my darling! Is it possible that she may be mine again—mine by the laws of man, and with the smile of God upon our union? Oh, Charlie, it is too much—I cannot realise it!"

"Don't try to do anything but *act*, old fellow. You've been realising too much already, it strikes me; you look ten years older in a couple of days. A change of work will be the best thing for you."

"What shall I do first, Charlie? It is you who must advise me."

"Go up to town to your friend Cole. Tell him of your intentions, and get him to help you in your search. I fancy he is more used to that sort of work than you are."

"True, true; and he is the best of fellows, though he *did* deal me such a terrible blow. I will start for London by the seven o'clock train; and you—what will *you* do, old chum?"

"I shall return to Blue Mount, and try to smooth matters over for the old lady."

"Give her my love, Charlie, and explain why I felt myself unable to carry the news myself."

"I will explain everything; never fear."

"You are the very best of fellows," said Bernard earnestly. "What can I ever do to repay you?"

"Some day I may put your gratitude to the test," replied Anderson, laughing, as he bid his friend farewell.

CHAPTER VIII.

MRS. PENFOLD was not staying with Mrs. Pinner, although the housekeeper was quite correct in saying she had gone there. But in the afternoon of

the day succeeding Phyllida's mysterious flight, and whilst Bernard was still in town, she had received a note by post, a faint scrawl in pencil, half washed out by tears, in which her cousin had told her partly the truth,—had said, at least, that she had disgraced Mr. Freshfield beyond all remedy, and should never return to Briarwood again. And then Mrs. Penfold had felt that the rectory was no longer the place for her, and that it would be more delicate to go at once before the parson came home. So she had packed up her small belongings and thrown herself on the hospitality of her sister. Perhaps, if Mrs. Pinner had sympathised with her anxiety about Phyllida, or shown the least compassion for the unfortunate girl, cast upon the world for the second time, friendless and alone, Mrs. Penfold might have prolonged her stay in Bluemere until she had ascertained what position the Freshfields intended to take up with regard to her cousin's behaviour. But Mrs. Pinner's condemnation was so entirely without limit, that Mrs. Penfold made up her mind to return to Gatehead the very next day.

"Be good enough, Maria," Mrs. Pinner had said, when her sister tried to make some excuse for the absent girl on account of her defective training, "be good enough never to mention that disgraceful creature's name in my hearing again. We cannot touch pitch without being defiled, and I feel as if it would be a long time before my house and surroundings recovered the contamination they must have contracted from her presence here."

But Mrs. Penfold had a mother's heart. It was quite a mistake on the part of nature not to have given her children, for she would have loved them tenderly, and her thoughts and prayers, poor old soul, were with her erring little cousin night and day.

"Indeed, Charlotte," she replied, "I think you are too hard on her. Of course I cannot entirely understand her reasons for leaving Briarwood from the very incoherent note she sent me, but I can see that she thinks it her duty to go, and that she is very, very miserable in going; and a woman who does her duty, although it makes her wretched, cannot be altogether bad."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Mrs. Pinner. "You always were a simpleton, Maria, but I hardly thought you could be so silly at your age. Do you suppose it's likely she's gone *alone*? Did you ever hear of a married woman running away by herself? You must be a born fool to believe it."

"Good gracious me, Charlotte, what do you mean? Who do you suppose she would take with her? Besides, I am *certain* she went alone. There were only Mr. Freshfield and Mr. Cole and the servants in the rectory at the time, and I can answer for it they all stayed behind."

Mrs. Pinner gazed at her sister with the supremest contempt.

"Well, if this comes of letting lodgings," she began, when the other interrupted her,—

"Do you mean to insinuate," she said indignantly, "that Phyllida has disgraced us all by running away with *a man*? Oh, Charlotte, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. And when you know how devoted she was to Mr. Freshfield, how can you say so wicked and cruel a thing?"

"Hoity toity," cried Mrs. Pinner, "here's a flare

up about nothing. What do you suppose all the village are saying about it? Annie Warren tells me there is hardly a cottage where they have not heard the whole story, and put their own construction on it. Run away alone, indeed; a likely story. No one else will believe it if *you* do—not if she came back to-morrow with that smooth hypocritical face of hers and swore she'd only been on a round of parochial visits."

"But who could she run away with?" gasped Mrs. Penfold, staggering under the unexpected assertion.

"Who, indeed? As if my lady hadn't cunning enough to keep all her affairs secret. You know how close she was from the beginning. Don't ask who *is* it, but who may it *not* be. Any one, I should say, who would take her. Mr. Anderson, perhaps, for want of a better. Those Papists will do anything if they're not found out, and Mr. Anderson is one of the slyest looking men I ever saw."

"Charlotte!" exclaimed Mrs. Penfold, looking her sister full in the face, "you are the very wickedest woman I ever saw."

"*What!*" screamed Mrs. Pinner.

"I repeat it, the wickedest woman I ever saw. You go to church twice every Sunday and read your Bible, and say your prayers, and you are always talking of religious things and using sacred names; but you haven't got as much charity in you as a grain of mustard seed. You made the worst instead of the best of poor Phyllida from the very beginning, and only left off abusing her when she became Mr. Freshfield's wife, and there was everything to gain by keeping friends with her. And now that she is under a cloud again, poor little soul, though you know no more of the facts of the case than I do, you suspect her of the grossest iniquity without any better foundation than what your unworthy suspicions supply you with. But, in my opinion, you are much more to blame than she is (since you have enjoyed so many more privileges), and, instead of reviling her, you had better go upstairs and go down on your knees and pray to Heaven to change your hard heart and make you more charitable to your fellow-creatures."

During this harangue Mrs. Pinner's face had

gradually assumed the appearance of an infuriated turkey cock. Her wattles (if I may be allowed to use such an expression for a lady's double chin) had turned purple, her forehead was crimson, and every poppy in her cap shook, as though under the breath of a tornado.

"Maria Penfold," she ejaculated as soon as she could speak, "leave my house!"

"You need not take the trouble of turning me out, Charlotte. I wouldn't stay here if you paved my room with gold. No, and I wouldn't change places with you (although you do look down on me for letting lodgings), not if you were a duchess in your own right."

"Leave my house!" repeated Mrs. Pinner. "I will listen to no more insults at your hands."

"And you never will," was Mrs. Penfold's parting shot, "for unless your hard heart is softened, and you begin to practise the religion which at present you only talk about, I shall take good care not to see you again," and with that she sent out for the only vehicle to be hired in Bluemere, and

was landed safely by the train in Gatehead the same evening.

But she had the consolation of receiving an unfeignedly hearty welcome on her return. Miss Annadale, who scarcely ever stirred out of her own apartments, came half way down stairs to greet her landlady, and Captain Barclay insisted on her sharing his roast chicken and mushrooms, and drinking a glass of Madeira with him in his snug little parlour, instead of sitting down to a solitary meal.

"First-rate wine that, Mrs. Penfold," said the old sailor, as he handed her a bumper of the rich coloured Madeira; "drink it down. It will do you good, I promise you. That Madeira made four voyages round the Cape in my own ship, Mrs. Penfold, so I ought to know its quality, if no one else does."

And under the influence of the Madeira, and Captain Barclay's kindness, the poor woman unbosomed her griefs to him, and confided her fears with regard to her young cousin.

"Think of that poor young creature, captain, wandering about the world alone—and so pretty,

too. What will become of her? I assure you I haven't slept a wink since it happened, for wondering what I can do to find her again. For whether she's right or wrong, she's too young to be left to herself, and I must have her back at Gatehead, as sure as my name is Maria Penfold."

"Mrs. Penfold," exclaimed the old sailor, extending his brown hand across the table for her acceptance, "you're a good woman, madam!—a good woman, never mind who the other may be. Let that pretty girl with the big brown eyes go about the world alone, without a friend or protector? By gad! no. Why, I'd protect her myself, if there was no one else to do it. But I don't see how you are to get at her, my dear, unless you advertise in the papers."

"Why, of course, captain, that is the very thing," cried Mrs. Penfold, jumping up from her chair; "and I'll have the advertisement written out and sent to the post-office this very evening. I suppose I'd better insert it in the *Telegraph* and *Standard*."

"And the *Times*, my dear, the *Times*," added

the captain, who was used to becoming rather affectionate in his speech after dinner.

"And the *Times*, of course," replied Mrs. Penfold. "What a help you are to me, captain. Whatever should I do without you?"

"And when you have dispatched your advertisement, you will come back again, won't you?" said Captain Barclay.

"Well, captain, if you *really* require me," replied Mrs. Penfold bashfully.

"*Really* require you, madam. I really require you every hour of the day. You don't know what my life has been during your visit to Bluemere—torture, Mrs. Penfold, torture. Sarah has been very attentive—I have no complaint to make of Sarah; but she is not, and she cannot be, yourself; that is her misfortune, Mrs. Penfold, and not her fault. I have missed you every day and everywhere. My bed has not felt the same, and my parlour has not looked the same, and this chicken, for instance—although Sarah has done her best with it, I am sure, her very best—yet this chicken is *not* browned in the way *you* would have browned it; eh, Mrs. Penfold?"

"Well, you see, captain, it is impossible to put grey heads on green shoulders; however, I am home once more to attend to all your little comforts, and not likely to leave you again in a hurry."

"Not if I know it, madam, not if I know it," replied Captain Barclay, with a facetious wink at his landlady.

"Well, really, captain, I don't see how you are to prevent it; not if my mind were bent upon going, for instance."

"There are ways and means, Mrs. Penfold, ways and means," said the captain, with another wink.

Meanwhile, we must return to Blue Mount. Charles Anderson only waited until Bernard was well out of the way to break the intelligence of her son's disappointment to Mrs. Freshfield, and do what he could to comfort her, the poor old lady's grief and shame were but too genuine. A divorced woman was, in her eyes, quite as ineligible a subject for the marriage contract as a wife would be, and Anderson did not attempt to refute any of her arguments on this part of the matter. Only he kept on repeating the fact that Phyllida's first husband

was now dead, and therefore according to the laws of God and man there could be no possible obstacle to her re-union with Bernard. But to his astonishment he found that Mrs. Freshfield did not take this view of the subject at all, and was strongly opposed to the idea of her son having anything more to do with the woman who, in her opinion, had betrayed him. This mother, who had reared her child in the strictest principles of her own religion; who had dedicated him from his birth (as it were) to the Lord and His service, and who (Anderson would have supposed) could have but one desire in her heart at this crisis, namely, that Bernard should act up to his profession, and do what was right; commenced arguing against the advisability of a second marriage on the most worldly grounds.

“But it would be perfect madness,” she said, when Anderson confided to her the motive that had taken her son to town. “Surely, Mr. Anderson, you never gave Bernard such advice as that? By the Lord’s mercy he has been delivered from the bonds of a strange woman, though, if he had only waited to consult his poor mother on the subject,

he never would have married a person of whom one knew *positively nothing*; however, he was head-strong, and had his own way, and now that his evil has been turned into good, I consider it would be flying into the face of Providence to re-forged the chains that have been struck off him."

"Do you mean to say then, Mrs. Freshfield, that you would advise Bernard *not* to marry his wife again?"

"Certainly, I would, Mr. Anderson. She is *not* his wife. You have said so yourself. She is only a most disreputable person—a disgrace to her sex—a—"

"Oh, pardon me, I never said so much as that, because I do not think it; but, even if it were the case, I am not sure but what it would still be Bernard's duty to try and reform her by the only means in his power."

"Well, I consider your ideas of duty are far-fetched, Mr. Anderson, and I am surprised to hear a member of *your* Church upholding the sanctity of marriage with a *divorce*. I am no friend to Popery—"

"No, indeed, you need not tell me that, Mrs. Freshfield."

"But I do at least agree with it in one particular, and that is, that had this woman's divorce from her first husband been ever so regular, it should not have permitted her to contract an alliance with my poor misguided son."

"And I am not likely to gainsay you, Mrs. Freshfield. I say nothing of the past, except that it is as sad as sad can be, and I feel deeply for my dear old friend; but I think that his duty now lies straight before him, and that is to make the woman to whom he is already united by ties of the tenderest affection his wife by law."

"Well, I am surprised to hear you say so," replied the mother coldly. "I was aware, of course, that poor Bernard was very much infatuated with her when he believed her to be a good and pure woman (though why he should have squandered a small fortune in decking her out in pearls and satin far above her station in life I never could understand), but I should have *thought* and *hoped* that, his eyes once opened to her iniquity and de-

ceit, a *son of mine* would have turned from her with the loathing and disgust which she deserves."

"Oh no, Mrs. Freshfield, don't wrong your own nature by saying so," pleaded Anderson. "What! turn from those we love when they most need our counsel and assistance?—look the other way when our dear ones, however erring, lift their tearful eyes to ours?—shut the door upon the repentant sinner who is longing to receive her pardon from our lips? That is not the way a merciful God deals with *our* trespasses—blessed be His holy name!" said Anderson reverently, "or we should indeed be the most forlorn and miserable of creatures. What should you say, madam, if your heavenly Judge dealt with *your* sins as you would have Bernard deal with hers?"

Now, although Mrs. Freshfield called herself a miserable sinner every Sunday, and perhaps two or three times in the week to boot, she did not in the least believe that she was so, and Charles Anderson's straightforward question considerably ruffled her dignity. That a man, and a young man, and above all other things a Catholic young man, should

presume to talk to her in such a manner greatly offended her; and she showed the offence in her answer,—

“If you intend to compare me with the person we were speaking of, Mr. Anderson, we had better drop the subject; for I cannot see that the two cases tally in the slightest degree. I do not need *you* to remind me that there is forgiveness in heaven for *all* who sin on earth, but I do not see how it is to be attained by setting this depraved young woman again in the position which she has polluted and disgraced, and when Bernard *might* have secured one of the most estimable and pious young ladies for his helpmeet—a girl with the oldest blood of Scotland in her veins, and descended from a line of kings—one who would have conducted herself in all things as the wife of a minister should do, and been an honour and blessing to the whole family.”

“Yes, it is unfortunate, doubtless, that he could not see with your eyes; but these are matters, Mrs. Freshfield, in which men will and ought to judge for themselves. An union entered into from any

feelings, however pure—except those of entire and disinterested love—cannot be a real union. I have seen men marry, apparently from the best of motives—for conscience' sake—or for the good of others, but however unselfishly entered into, unless it is from love alone, marriage is no longer a sacrament, but sinks to the level of a legal contract.”

“And would you call my poor son's marriage with this dreadful girl a sacrament, Mr. Anderson?”

“I do indeed, Mrs. Freshfield, and would continue to do so, even if he did not marry her over again. His heart is knit up in hers, as hers is no less in his, and *that* constitutes a true marriage.”

“I don't believe it,” interposed the old lady, trembling with excitement. “My poor son's eyes were dazzled by her beauty till he could not distinguish right from wrong, and I consider that any one who persuades him to take that woman back again, is his worst enemy, and not his friend.”

“And you would wish Bernard never to see her again then, nor to inquire after her fate?”

“Decidedly I would. He has taken a wife from among the daughters of Heth as the rebellious son

of Rebecca did, and you see what has come of it. He ought to thank Providence, who has helped him to escape so great a danger, and not fly in its face by courting it a second time."

"And you would consider him free to marry again if he felt inclined to do so?" continued the young man.

"Of course he is free. What claim can she bring against him? Oh, if Bernard would only see it in the same light, and put some dear good girl in the vacant place!"

"You think the divorce he has obtained from his present wife is more legal then, than the one *she* got from her former husband?"

"Oh, there is no question of divorce," replied the old lady, tossing her head in a nervous manner; "she never was his wife, and I would rather discuss the painful subject no longer, Mr. Anderson."

"Very good, madam. I have done Bernard's bidding, and therefore may take my leave of you. But I am glad I do not share your sentiments on the question of right and wrong; neither do I think they would receive endorsement from above."

And Anderson quitted Blue Mount, leaving Mrs. Freshfield with the very uncomfortable sensation of having been brought to task, and considerably worsted in the encounter. Laura was not present at this interview. Had she been it would not have proceeded with so little interruption, for this young lady coincided with the opinions of Mr. Anderson on all subjects in a remarkable degree. But she received the full benefit of it afterwards.

“Such an extraordinary manner in which to be addressed by a young man of *his* age—not so old as my own son by a couple of years—and a Papist into the bargain!” exclaimed Mrs. Freshfield, as she retailed the circumstances to Laura. “I wonder what the world will come to next? but Mr. Anderson may rest assured of one thing, that I know my duty, and I will do it. I should have liked dear Miss Janet to have been present at our conversation this morning. I know she will entirely coincide with the view *I* take of this disgraceful affair.”

“Oh, mamma dear,” cried Laura, “don’t say anything to that old woman about it. What business is it of hers? And of course if *she* hears it,

Bella and the laird will hear it also, and we shall be obliged to listen to all their comments on the matter. It is not delicate, mamma, it is purely a family misfortune—which we should keep entirely to ourselves for Bernie's sake, if not for our own. And do oblige me by putting off the visit of these Muckheeps, at all events for the present. They asked themselves, so it could easily be managed without giving them offence."

Mrs. Freshfield regarded her daughter solemnly.

"And you would seriously ask me, Laura," she said, "in this, the most unfortunate crisis of my life—when the Hand of Chastening is so visibly upon us—to deprive myself of the counsel and advice of my very best and most valued friends?"

"Oh, mamma, they are not your best friends, believe me. Miss Janet is only a canting old hypocrite, and you have never seen the laird at all. If he is anything like his sister though, I hope he will cut his visit short."

"*Cut his visit short!*" reiterated Mrs. Freshfield, with much the same look that might have been expected of her had her daughter uttered a blas-

phemy; "is that the way, I ask you, Laura, to speak of a man who has spent his life in doing good to his fellow-creatures, who has expatriated himself for their sakes, and relinquished the society dearest to him, in order that he might bring souls grovelling on their knees for pardon."

"Well, mamma, if he has done all this, it is very good of him, but we have only Miss Janet's word for it, you know. And in any case, we don't want him to grovel after souls here—unless you have any particular work for him in that way yourself," said Laura brightly.

But Mrs. Freshfield was in no humour to respond to brightness—however innocent.

"I shall *not* put off my friends' visit," she said sternly; "neither shall I conceal from them the misfortune which has fallen upon us. They will advise me, I am sure, to do what is best in the matter for my unhappy son, whom *your* friend, Mr. Anderson, appears bent upon leading to his ruin."

"I don't know why you should emphasise Mr. Anderson particularly as *my* friend, mamma," returned Laura, with a suspiciously bright colour;

“but I am not ashamed of him if he is, and I do not believe that he will give Bernie any advice but what is good and proper.”

“Wait and see,” was Mrs. Freshfield’s oracular reply, for she had a strong suspicion that if she told Miss Laura what she meant by “ruin,” that the wordy warfare just ended with Charles Anderson would have to be fought all over again, so she wisely held her tongue. The arrival of the Muckheeps the day after was a grand event in her life, for, naturally, poor Phyllida’s history had to be retailed from the beginning to the end,—from the first time they met her with Mrs. Pinner at Briarwood, to the last time she had sat in that very chair dear Miss Janet was then occupying (“just as if she had been an honest woman,” as Mrs. Freshfield indignantly added), and the two ladies wept and wailed and groaned and condemned together over the reputation which they considered dead, just (as Laura had prophesied) like two dogs tearing a carcase to pieces, and determined not to leave a shred without the mark of their teeth upon it. But the Laird o’ Muckheep—before whom Miss Janet (and, consequently, Mrs. Freshfield) mutely

bowed, as though he had been one of the kings from whom he boasted his descent—took little or no part in the discussion.

He was a very different man from what Laura had expected to see him. She had pictured the laird in fancy to be very like his sister,—in fact, an old woman in “breeks,” but, on the contrary, he did not resemble her in the slightest degree. He was a large-boned, muscular man, very plain, with red hair, a dirty complexion, small ferrety eyes, and a bottle nose. He was, moreover, very silent, and allowed Miss Janet to do all the talking, although he never deprecated the fulsome praise she lavished on him, but allowed himself to be worshipped with the most perfect nonchalance, taking it apparently as much his right as some ugly old Chinese god set up in a joss house might do, and with about the same amount of interest in his worshippers. Laura, whose eyes were everywhere at the same moment, noticed that whenever Miss Janet lauded her brother’s goodness and self-denial, the laird would wink and blink, and become restless and uneasy, changing the subject as soon as he could, and sometimes in the most abrupt manner; but as he never

denied the praise she gave him, the girl attributed his manner to his modesty.

"Ainly to think, Mrs. Fraich-field," the old Scotchwoman would cry, "that this gude mon has ex-peetri-ated himsel' fra his ain land far mair than twenty yair in order to been-efit his peerishing fellow-creatures."

"Noo, noo, Janet," the laird, who spoke as broad Scotch as his sister, replied, "it's mickle I have dune. Let us tairn the soobject."

"*Mickle!*" screamed Miss Janet, "d'ye ca' it a mickle thing, mon, to bide awa' fra your ain for the space o' twenty yair, an' to pair-se a' that wheele in preaching and praying and striving for the puir sawls that wouldna' strive for themsels. Why, it's joost the laird's wairk that ye've gee-ven up your varry life for, and it's a greet re-waird will be laid up for ye in heaven."

"Noo, noo, Janet, not me whoole life. Ye forgit that I vee-sited the cairstle ten yairs agoo," said the laird, with a modest disclaimer of so much merit.

"Brither, I maun hae me ain way, and Mrs. Fraich-field here will uphoold me. It's a gran' wairk, and a blessed ane that you've geeven yair

time to, an' we should a' be prood to claim ye as a freend or a relation. Bella—bar-ck!"

"Yes, indeed, dear Miss Muckheep," chimed in Mrs. Freshfield approvingly. "We should indeed be proud, and we are (at least I can speak for myself) to welcome the laird back to England. Twenty years! it is indeed a long time though none too long to devote to so noble a cause. And were your efforts much blessed out there, dear sir? Did you bring many poor lost souls back into the fold?"

"Yes, yes; I had pratty gude soocess, madam, althoo' a mon shouldna speak of what he has dune."

"Hoot, brither," interposed Miss Janet, "but if ye air a bairning and a shining leeght, ye mauna pet yourself oonder the beed, bit upon a carn-dle-steek, that sae ye may geeve leeght to the whoole hoose. Dinna ye haud wi' me, Mrs. Fraich-field?"

"Indeed, indeed, I do, although your estimable brother's modesty renders his worth all the greater. Ah, we have been in great need of a missionary to do the good work here, I can assure you. What effect might not the laird's influence have had upon that poor misguided soul at the rectory?"

"Do ye speak o' your sonnie the meenister, Mrs.

Fraich-field, or o' the hizzy he pet oop theer as his wife?"

Laura, who had been silently boiling over this conversation, here burst in with a remonstrance,—

"Please to remember, Miss Janet, that the lady you speak of is about to become my brother's wife by law."

"No, no, Laura, I trust not—not if *I* can help it," interposed her mother.

"You will not be able to help it, mamma; and I think the less the subject is discussed with strangers the better."

"Hoot, what is the lassie speering at?" demanded Miss Janet. "Ye dinna shoo muckle re-speect for your mither to interroopt her after sic a fashion, Mees Fraich-field."

"I desire to show respect for my brother and his wife, madam, which is hardly to be attained by discussing their private affairs."

"Laura, how can you speak so to Miss Janet, who, you must know, is in my entire confidence on this unhappy subject? We have just been consulting together on the best course for me to pursue in the matter, and I have made up my mind to follow your poor brother to London to-morrow."

"Bernard will be exceedingly annoyed if you do so, mamma. He is quite old enough to manage his own business, and you will gain nothing by putting your finger in the pie."

"Petting your feenger in the poy? I dinna oonderstan' your dairghter's mode of speaking, Mrs. Fraich-field. I never raired oor Bella after sic a fashion; it wou'dna become a leddy o' Muckheep at a'."

"No, indeed," replied her hostess fretfully; "nor any lady in the world, I should imagine. Laura's *fast* mode of speaking shocks me as much as it can do yourself. But to return to my poor, erring son. What a consolation it would be to me if you and the dear laird (who has had so much experience in winning back lost souls to the right way) would accompany me on my sad errand to-morrow. It seems almost too much to ask from you, but I shall need both support and guidance on the journey."

"If you are resolved to go, mamma," said Laura, "for heaven's sake go alone!"

"Young leddy," exclaimed Miss Janet, "ye dinna ken the reet way to speak to sech as air abune yairsel'. Your gude mither is awa' to Loon-don to

try and breeng your puir brither back to a sense of his re-sponsibeelities; and if I can be of ainy cairmfort or cainsolation to her on the jair-ney, she maun depeend upon my coompany."

"Ah, you are indeed too good to me," sighed Mrs. Freshfield. "What should I do without your kind sympathy and counsel? If I can gain an interview with my poor Bernard before his artful friend Mr. Anderson—a Jesuit in disguise, I verily believe, Miss Janet—persuades him to sacrifice himself afresh, and can bring him back with us to Blue Mount, all may yet be well. The dear laird's advice would be invaluable to him at this critical period. He could so ably point out to my poor boy the way to induce that young person to abandon her depraved and godless life without going to the length of marrying her over again. An asylum is the place for her—some nice, respectable asylum where she will be plainly shown the depths of her wickedness and sin."

Here Laura rose hastily, and gathering her work together, left the room.

"My poor child does not like this subject," continued Mrs. Freshfield, with a compassionate shake

of the head. "I have trained her carefully, dear Miss Janet, and with many prayers, but her heart, I regret to say, remains hard and stubborn to this day. I believe that she even goes so far as to *regret* her brother's merciful escape from the thralls of the bond-woman."

"Ay!" ejaculated Miss Janet. "Ye should jeest pet me brither upon her in prayer; her hairt wou'dna' lang remain haird nor stooborn after that. Mony and mony a hairt has he subdooed and melted by his fair-vour, till it coudna' weep eno'. Ay!—but he's a peen-acle of the temple before wheech naething can stan' upreet."

"And do you think I might really ask him to accompany us to town to-morrow? It would be an immense favour; but oh, so gratefully appreciated. I cannot believe that Bernard will be able to resist his eloquence; however he may be inclined to walk in the downward path."

"Oh, the laird will go with us, dinna fear, Mrs. Fraich-field. He maun aye be wheer the gude wairk is goin' on; and if wairds o' his can tairn the puir sinner fra' the eer-or of his ways, he will be tairned, ye may reest assured o' that."

“Indeed, indeed, I do. I feel as if an *angel* were going with us to point out the right thing to do, and the right word to say at the right time,” cried Mrs. Freshfield enthusiastically, as she clasped the freckled and hairy hand of the Laird o’ Muckheep between her own.

He turned aside with a conscious air and a few muttered words of acquiescence; but his hostess was gazing at him through rose-coloured spectacles, and attributed his confusion entirely to the humility of his pious soul. And the next day, therefore, to Laura’s intense annoyance, her mother set out for London, supported on either side by a Muckheep, like sympathising friends upholding the chief mourner at a funeral.

“How angry Bernie will be by their interference,” she thought. “It would have been bad enough if mamma had elected to go to him alone; but accompanied by that pair of canting old hypocrites, she will drive him nearly crazy, and when he has so much to trouble him, poor darling.”

She was full of such thoughts when a servant brought her word that Mr. Anderson was in the drawing-room. She flew to meet him, in a manner

most undignified for a young lady of two-and-twenty, and with a bloom upon her cheeks that looked suspiciously as though she were uncommonly glad to see him. Perhaps Charles Anderson guessed the truth; for as Laura ran up to greet him, he grasped her out-stretched hands and kissed her straight upon the lips. She drew backward with a face of crimson.

"Oh, Charlie, you shouldn't have done that. You never did it before."

"Perhaps not; but there must be a beginning to all things, you know, Laura."

"Not to bad things, though."

"Was that a bad thing then, Laura? Tell me."

"Well, it can't be quite right, can it?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, I don't know, but it isn't the usual mode of greeting between friends, Charlie."

"But we are not friends."

"Aren't we?" she asked, with professed innocence. "I thought we were the very best."

"So we are; but something more, I hope, Laura. I love you dearly, and I am sure you know it."

"I have hoped it, Charlie."

"That's a brave woman to tell the truth at once. Then it's all right between us?"

"Between *us*—oh yes! but, Charlie, have you ever thought of mamma?"

Charlie laughed.

"Rather too often for my peace of mind, Laura. She doesn't like me; I am aware of that."

"I don't think she has any personal objection to *you*, dear; but it's the religion. Mamma is frightfully bigoted, you know. I really believe that she imagines there is not the slightest chance of your going to heaven."

"And what do *you* think, my Laura?"

"Oh, Charlie, I think you are everything that is best. I only wish I had the same assurance of salvation as yourself. To give up one's family and friends, as you have done, and all one's prospects in life for the sake of your faith, what more could any man do to prove his sincerity? It is a grander sacrifice than even the martyrs made of old. They gave up this life to gain a better; but you have given up all the comforts of the world, and chosen to walk through it without luxury or love, in order that you may remain true to yourself; and I have

honoured you for it, dear Charlie, above all other men, ever since Bernard told me the story."

"Don't make too much of it, Laura. If you could guess the consolations I have received in exchange, you would not think it such a sacrifice. And now, if I am to have your love into the bargain, I shall be more than happy, only you mustn't forget that I am a poor man. My father has cut me out of his will, and will not even hear my name mentioned in his presence. I have only the work of my two hands to offer my wife as a support."

"That is not of the slightest consequence," said Laura indifferently, "for I have money of my own as well as Bernie. What *I* am thinking of is the prejudice of your father and my mother. Charlie, isn't it extraordinary that people who profess to love God with their whole hearts, and desire His glory above all other things, should quarrel with *any* form by which their fellow-creatures strive to serve Him too?"

"It is almost incredible, Laura, yet we know it is true. But I cannot call such people Christians, even though they are my own flesh and blood. They are pious dogs in the manger: quite satisfied

with their own position, and ready to snarl at any one who attempts to dispute it. I suppose it really did the ox more good to nibble at a few straws than it did the dog to lie on them; but since he had no stomach for straw himself, he was too blind and selfish to see that the ox needed it. If my friends and relations have no eyes for the beauty of the Catholic Church, and no ears for the sublimity of her doctrine, I pity them and I pray for them; but I do not blame them, for the mind must be spiritually opened to view it as I do, only I cannot understand why they must needs quarrel because they cannot agree with me."

"Do you pity me, Charlie?" whispered Laura, sidling up to him.

"A little, because you are going to fall into my clutches. Do you pity yourself?"

She shook her head.

"I am quite happy as I am. I do not know what I may become as the years roll on, but at present it seems to me as if life could never be fuller of interest for me than it is. I have had Bernie ever since I could remember, and now I have got you, and I cannot tell which is the best of

you; he as a Protestant or you as a Catholic. And I hardly know which of you I love the best either," she added more shyly, "nor, if I had to give up one, which I should choose. So you must let me be the link between you, Charlie, that when you look at me you may both remember that, as I bind you together by the names of wife and sister, so the great Christian Churches should be bound together in brotherly love by the one Holy Name which alone can save us all."

Anderson drew Laura closer to his side, and repeated the operation with which he had greeted her entrance, and this time she made no objection, although the tears were shining in her bright eyes.

"Oh, Charlie, I am so happy!"

"So am I, dearest; and you will really marry me then, spite of all your mother may say?"

"Mamma will come round after a time. She is generally open to persuasion from Bernie or me. You know how strongly set she was at first against poor Phyllida?"

"That reminds me, darling, that I came down here this morning with news of Bernard. Let us find Mrs. Freshfield and tell her at once."

Laura's face fell.

"Oh, I had quite forgotten. You put everything out of my head, Charlie; mamma, I am sorry to say, has just started for London to see my brother. I begged and entreated her not to go, for I am sure her visit will annoy him, but she would not listen to anything I said; and what is more, she has taken those two Muckheeps with her—the old laird and his sister—and you know how Bernard dislikes Miss Janet. I am sure something very disagreeable will happen when they meet."

Anderson became as grave as herself.

"I am exceedingly sorry to hear this, Laura, and I think, under the circumstances, it was the most ill-advised course your mother could take; and this morning, too, of all days."

"Why not this morning, Charlie?" asked Laura in alarm. "What has happened to make this day worse than others?"

"Nothing but what will make *you* glad, Laura, but, at the same time, will render Mrs. Freshfield's visit rather *mal à propos*. Bernard has found his wife again."

"Oh! Charlie, why didn't you tell me that be-

fore?" cried Laura, bursting into tears of pleasure and excitement. "Phyllida home again! Phyllida with Bernard! My dear, dear sister found! Oh, I am so grateful, so happy! How can I repay you for bringing me such joyful news?"

"Kiss me again," suggested the practical Charlie.

"I *will*," exclaimed Laura determinately, as she put both her arms round her lover's neck, and lifted her burning face to his. "I would give you a hundred kisses, Charlie, if you wished it for making me so happy."

"All right, Laura; go on."

"No, no, we mustn't be foolish. But tell me all about it. Where did he find her? Where are they now? How soon can they be married again?"

"Gently, Laura, you are going too fast. Bernard has received intelligence of his wife—he hoped to meet her again to-day—and as poor Phyllida seems to be in a miserable state of doubt and uncertainty as to whether she ought to return to her husband, he thought the presence of his dear little sister would be of great service to both of them."

"Did he send you for me? Does he wish me

to go to London? Dear, dear Bernie," said warm-hearted Laura.

"Yes; indeed that is just what he wants, and sent me to obtain your mother's permission to escort you to his side. He thinks that if his arguments have no effect on Phyllida, your persuasions are certain to prevail."

"Of course—of course, I will do my very best, and if she will not return to him, I can at least remain with her. But, Charlie, mamma and those horrid Muckheeps will be there. Ought I to go up at the same time?"

"If you are not afraid to trust yourself with me, Laura, I think that fact is an extra reason for your making no delay in joining your brother. It is very probable, I am sorry to say, that they may burst in upon him just as he has been reunited to his wife, and I am afraid to think what may pass between them, or how serious a breach their visit may cause. Your presence will be an immense protection to your sister-in-law, and, I am sure, a comfort to Bernard."

"Then I will get ready to go with you at once, Charlie. There is only Bella Muckheep in the

house, and as she never does anything but knit stockings, she will not miss me for a few hours. I shall tell her I am suddenly summoned to join my brother. Ring the bell, and order the pony chaise as soon as it can be got ready, and I will be with you again before it comes round."

And with a smile and a nod, Laura Freshfield flew off to her own room, leaving Charles Anderson in a very contented and self-satisfied frame of mind.

CHAPTER IX.

BERNARD FRESHFIELD had started for London about a week before this, and made his way at once to the hotel where he knew that Nelson Cole had taken up his quarters. He found his friend at home and alone, looking rather more haggard than he had done at Briarwood, as though he had been somewhat anxious and thoughtful since they parted, and sitting at a table covered with papers.

"Bernard, my boy!" he exclaimed, as our parson made his appearance, "I am glad you have come up to town again. I was just about to write and ask you to do so. I have heard of some business

since I saw you last that will detain me in England, so I expect to be stationary here for the next few weeks; and I want you to spend them with me. It will be ever so much better for you than moping at Briarwood by yourself."

"Thank you, Cole," replied Bernard, somewhat shyly, and there he stopped. Nelson Cole was surprised at his manner and appearance. He had expected to see him the very picture of dejection, but he looked rather cheerful than otherwise, although his eyes were heavy and his cheeks pale. Yet there was an air about him as of one who had passed through the suffering and found peace on the other side.

"You are bearing this trouble better than I expected, Bernard," said Nelson Cole, almost jealously.

"Am I? You don't know what I have gone through since we parted. But I confess I feel happier now than I hoped to do. I had my dear friend Charles Anderson talking to me for a couple of hours this afternoon, and he made me see things in a different light."

"Ah, he is the pious Papist, is he not?"

"Yes, he is a Papist; and very proud of being

so; and he is pious, like most of his faith. It is an exception to the rule when a Papist is not pious."

"And he talked to you about heaven, I suppose, and the reward laid up for martyrs who sacrifice themselves to their opinions, until you fell in love with suffering, and are going to add a hair shirt to the loss of your supposed wife?"

"Cole, my dear fellow, why do you speak to me in this way?" exclaimed Bernard. "I came up to London to tell you of the resolution I have, after much thought, arrived at; but if you are going to treat my confidence with sarcasm, you will frighten it away."

"What resolution can you possibly have arrived at but one?" grumbled Cole; "the girl never was married to you according to your own ideas. She has led you into spending some six months in what you would consider to be mortal sin; and all that remains for you is to do penance, and practise mortifications until you have purged yourself of even the memory of her unholy presence. I know you parsons. Everybody may go to the d—l so long as you save your own souls."

"But—*was* it sin, Cole?" asked Freshfield wistfully.

"Was *what* sin?" said the other.

"My living with Phyllida. She believed herself free: I believed her to be so, and I cannot think that an Almighty Father will punish an unintentional error. If we sinned, it was not with our eyes open. No; it is the concealment she used towards me that hurts me so terribly. If I can see her soul purged of that, I shall be content."

"And so you have come up to London, I suppose, to find her out, and bring her down on her knees for confession? Her husband is to be turned into her missionary, and treat her to a medley of passion and penitence, till the poor child will be totally unable to distinguish right from wrong. No, no, it must not be. I knew the girl in America, and I won't have her trifled with. You've renounced her—I don't question your right to do so, perhaps she is everything that is bad; but let the renunciations be final. There are plenty of parsons in the world beside yourself; and there is no need for you to go running after Phyllida Moss, and doubling her misery for the purpose of converting her."

Bernard stared at his old friend in amazement. He hardly knew him. Nelson Cole, who had always appeared so hardheaded, cynical and "cute," was now working himself up into something very much like a passion, and on behalf of a girl whose condition he had been the very one to bring about.

"I don't understand you," replied Bernard; "in the first place, you are bringing accusations against me without any cause; in the second, you condemn me unheard. Was it *I*, Cole, who turned my poor girl out of doors, or pronounced her unfit to hold the position she did at Briarwood? Why, the blow has nearly killed me, and after a day and night of torture, I came here to tell you that I have made up my mind, at all hazards, to find her again, and persuade her to become my wife."

Nelson Cole pushed the hair off his forehead, and looked up into his friend's face critically.

"Is that *so*?" he asked incredulously; "and have you well considered what taking Phyllida back again means in your profession and your family?"

"I have considered nothing but my own good and hers—we love each other, Cole—we belong to

each other—we stand alone and apart—two in one, inseparable—indivisible—not, mark you, because the law made us so, but because our hearts were joined before our hands. I have been very angry and very shocked. I don't deny it. Your revelations seemed at first to have made a gulf between us that nothing could again bridge over; but I am calmer now. I can regard things in a truer light; and I see that my life and hers will be spoiled if they do not come together again. You laughed at me once for writing and talking of my soul's mate. But it was true. I found her in Phyllida, and in spite of everything she is mine, and she must remain so."

"You intend to marry her again?"

"I intend, please God, to marry her again."

Nelson Cole leapt from his chair and seized Bernard's hand.

"God bless you, my boy! God bless you!" he exclaimed. "You have lifted a weight off my mind."

"How could I imagine," returned Bernard, "that you would receive my news like this—you who were so hard upon her—Cole?"

"No, not hard, not *hard*. Was I? Poor child! poor child!" replied the other man. "But if so, I am thankful you have the strength to remedy the harm I did her. Ah, Bernard, she loves you. I could envy you, my boy, for being so much loved, but I will not, for you deserve it. Only guard and protect her from herself for the future, and I will believe that for you at least there is a heaven and a reward laid up in it."

Then perceiving the look of utter astonishment with which his friend still regarded him, and suddenly remembering that he was talking in a very different strain from what he usually employed, Nelson Cole drifted into a sort of apology for his words.

"I daresay I seem to be talking a great deal of nonsense to you; but the fact is, Bernard, I found out the other day, from a conversation I had with Jack Neville, that Phyllida is the daughter of an old friend of mine."

"What! Do you mean the wife of the man Macpherson, whom Neville mentioned to us?"

Nelson Cole winced.

"Yes—his—his—wife. You are right. I find

that I knew her, ages ago, and it has made me feel a great interest in the daughter. And you really mean to take her back? You are not afraid of any more facts cropping up to nip your new-born resolution in the bud?"

"I could be afraid but of one thing, Cole, and that would be any uncertainty respecting her husband's death. You are *sure* that he is dead?"

"I *am* sure. I have made inquiries since I saw you last. The rascal was too well known to be able to pretend to die. He died in the Tombs, cheating justice to the last, as he had ever done."

"Then I breathe freely, Cole, and Phyllida will be my own again."

"But she may have done worse than that, remember," said Cole, wishing to test the sincerity of Bernard's resolution. "She was on the stage for a twelvemonth, and I won't be responsible for anything that happened to her during that period. Suppose she had half a score of lovers,—eh?"

Bernard bit his lip, but answered calmly,—

"I have determined that all bygones shall be bygones. If Phyllida consents to be my wife, we will begin afresh from the moment of our marriage.

She will never find me calling her to account for what took place before I knew her."

"Few men are so generous as that," said Cole, with a touch of his old sarcasm.

"Cole," replied Bernard earnestly, "don't you think that we men are rather hard, as a rule, upon our women. We allow ourselves every licence, but we call on them to be immaculate. They must not only be modest and single-minded, but they must live as though they were perfectly passionless and without feeling of any sort. Since I have entered the Church, men have naturally been more shy of bestowing their worldly confidences on me, but when I was a wild young fellow at Oxford, and up to any kind of spree myself, I used to hear and see what married men did when away from their wives, and even then, careless as I was, it shocked me. I used to think how surprised those men would be if, when they went home, their wives (having become aware of their behaviour) refused to receive them; and yet what would *they* have said if the same infidelities had been practised in their absence. They would have called their women by every foul name they could think of, and declare them unfit

to be the wives of honest men. And the law would have upheld them. But there is another law than that of man, Cole, and I am trying hard to look at this matter according to the law of God."

"Well, I believe, for your satisfaction, that Phyllida was always as good as gold in that respect; but she got tipsy one night—there is no doubt of that. You heard Jack Neville confirm my statement."

Bernard was gazing before him with dreamy eyes.

"Because she heard that the brute to whom she was tied was locked up, and she would be free from his persecution for two years," he answered. "Poor child! How she *must* have suffered to create such a reaction!"

"Oh, that's the way you take it; but isn't there just a chance of her relapsing?"

"Do you think so?" cried Bernard, with sudden energy, springing to his feet. "Oh no, no—not whilst my arms are round her to save her! My poor darling!—my poor betrayed and outcast Phyllida! If any such terrible harm should follow that one fall to degradation, it will be laid at *his* door,

not hers—at the door of *him* with whom she was forced into an unholy marriage; and I will fight *for* her and *with* her until we have stamped out the last foul memento of that horrible sacrifice. Oh no, Cole, don't think it. She cannot—she *shall* not fall again, with my love standing between her and temptation!”

Nelson Cole seized both his hands and held them as if they were in a vice.

“My boy!” he exclaimed—“my noble-hearted boy! The woman who mates with you should be an angel.”

“She *shall* be one,” said Bernard, “if the prayers of a lifetime can make her so. Don't tell me any more of her past; let us think only of her future. She is more to me a great deal than the love of my heart; she is a soul that God has put into my hands to save.”

And Bernard looked like a saint as he pronounced the words.

His friend wrung his hands again and sat down; then they both laid their enthusiasm aside for a while and became practical.

“I was only testing the stuff you were made of,”

said Cole, "and you have come nobly out of the trial; and now to business, Bernard. Do you know where that poor girl is?"

"Indeed, I do not. I am here to ask you to help me trace her."

"I have been thinking about her a great deal since we parted, and I imagine that old lady, Mrs. Penfold, will be better able to find her than ourselves. Didn't you tell me she was very kind to Phyllida at the time of your marriage?"

"Very kind, indeed. We were married from her house in Gatehead."

"Don't you think it is probable that Phyllida might again seek a shelter with her cousin at Gatehead?"

"Perhaps so; but Mrs. Penfold is still at Blue-mere. She is staying with her sister, Mrs. Pinner."

"Write to her, then, and ask her to go home, and be ready to receive Phyllida there. Then we will advertise as if from her cousin, begging the girl to return to her protection. I think we shall catch her that way. Of course we could put the matter into the hands of detectives; but the less publicity about these domestic affairs the better."

Bernard, taking his friend's advice, wrote to Mrs. Penfold to Bluemere; but as she had already left Mrs. Pinner's, the letter was forwarded to Gatehead, and reached there the very morning that the following lines appeared in the *Standard* in answer to Mrs. Penfold's advertisement:—

“Phyllida to Gatehead.—I cannot accept your offer. By-and-by, when I am independent, I may see you again, but not now. Many, many thanks, and may God bless you.”

Mrs. Penfold cut out the advertisement, and enclosed it in a letter (which might have been a chapter out of the Lamentations of Jeremiah) to Bernard, who immediately carried it to Nelson Cole.

“Independent, indeed!” exclaimed the latter. *“How is such a child to make herself independent in a howling wilderness like London, unless it be by returning to the stage, and she will find a difficulty in doing that. She is sure to look in the Standard again for another appeal, Bernard. We will insert one that is certain to bring an answer.”*

“But how will that enable us to ascertain her

address?" asked Bernard anxiously. "Each day that we are separated now seems like a purgatory to me."

"Patience, my son, patience. All things come to him who knows how to wait. This is the sort of thing I should advise you to insert in the paper:—

"Gatehead to Phyllida.—Mr. F. has consulted me about putting the case in the hands of the police. Do you wish him to find out your address or not?"

"And what do you expect her to reply to this?" asked Bernard ruefully. "She will only say 'No.' I feel the shock of discovery has driven her from me for ever."

"Bernard, my boy, you're a very good 'cuss,' but I calculate you've not been 'raised' in the States. This message will be in Phyllida's hands to-morrow at latest, and she will be in a regular fix about the police. Nothing frightens a woman like the law."

"But what's the good of frightening her, poor darling?"

"I'm coming to that, my son. The first effect

of her fright will be to make her rush to the *Standard* office with an answer to the advertisement. She will write to beg Mrs. Penfold to prevent her from seeing *you*."

"Well—"

"Well, I guess I shall have my eye on that office all the day, and when she appears to insert her advertisement, I shall drop down upon her—sharp."

"Oh, Cole, to-morrow—actually *to-morrow*! Is it possible that to-morrow I shall hold her in my arms again?"

"*Possible*, but only possible. Suppose she refuses to accompany me home?"

"Surely she will not refuse when she hears how we long to have her back again."

"Don't know. Women are fickle cattle to shoe behind. But if she accompanies me here, she may refuse to see *you*."

"Oh no, no. She loves me, Cole, believe me. She must yearn for me as much as I do for her."

"Good; but then there is another risk of failure—so don't be too sanguine. She may not go to the office herself, but send a messenger."

"And in that case, what *shall* we do?" asked Bernard mournfully.

"In that case, my chum, we must try the effect of another advertisement. But let us see what to-morrow will bring forth first."

The two men passed that evening together with a certain degree of cheerfulness, but Bernard was not too much absorbed in his own troubles, to observe that Nelson Cole looked forward to the morrow with almost as much anxiety as himself. It was with difficulty when the morning arrived that he could let him start on his quest alone—he was so sure that if he stood on the opposite side of the way, or up the next street, or under a door-way—that Phyllida would not perceive him until it was too late to make her escape. But Nelson Cole would not hear of his accompanying him, and made him promise into the bargain to keep to his own rooms in the hotel, until he was invited to enter those of his friend. And so the unfortunate parson, left behind in that state of mind when it is quite impossible to fix the attention upon anything, threw books and papers consecutively to one side, and ended by casting himself, face downwards, upon

the bed whilst he worked up his brain to a pitch of madness, by reviewing all the happiest scenes he had passed through with Phyllida, and trying to realise what would become of him if they never occurred again.

Meanwhile Nelson Cole took up his station opposite the office of the *Standard* paper, and watched carefully all who went in or came out. He felt more certain of success than he had confided to Bernard, for several reasons of his own. In the first place, he argued that when women are very anxious about a thing, they always like to do it themselves—they will not believe that any one else can do it so well; and secondly, Phyllida was a stranger in London, and not aware perhaps of how easily an advertisement can be sent, with a few stamps, through the post; and thirdly, she was not likely to be in a position to command the services of any one to do the errand for her. So he kept up a steady tramp on the opposite pavement with his keen eye watching the approachers from every quarter. About two o'clock she came, dressed in her serge costume, pale as a sheet, and with dark circles under her eyes, but still Phyllida, and looking so lovely that

every man's head turned to gaze after her as she passed. She came on fearlessly, though evidently labouring under the deepest depression. But she had no idea that any one in that vast crowd would single her out for notice, and when Nelson Cole, crossing the road, placed his hand upon her arm and said the word "Nessie," he frightened her so that she screamed. That name reminded her of all that was most terrible in her young life, and she turned about, half-expecting to see the face of Sandie Macpherson scowling at her, or the ghost of Fernan Cortès at her elbow. And when she recognised Nelson Cole, she seemed hardly less alarmed.

"Oh, Mr. Cole, why are you here? Why do you call me by that name?"

"I came here solely to find you, child, and I called you 'Nessie' because I knew your mother, and I used to call her so."

"You knew my mother, and yet you told *him* of me. Oh, I do not believe it. You are making some pretence in order to do me further harm. Let me go, Mr. Cole; pray, let me go. I never wish to see or speak to you again."

"Phyllida," said Nelson Cole earnestly, "will you

believe me when I tell you, that I wish now I had been dead before I confessed that you were recognised. But it is too late now for regret. Let me try therefore to make you some amends. You have said that I was kind to you once—”

“Oh yes, you were indeed,” she interrupted him gratefully; “what should I have done if you had not come to my rescue at that miserable time in Chicago? Why, I never could have left the city. I could not have come to England—I should not have seen *him*. Ah!—” and here Phyllida put her hand against her side as though to still a sudden pain.

“My poor child, you think after all, perhaps, that *that* did not turn out such a kindness. Well, well, never mind it now. I thought I saw my duty plain before me, but you were a little goose not to take my advice and tell Bernard yourself. But, Nessie—”

“Not Nessie, Mr. Cole, *pray* not Nessie.”

“Phyllida, then, if you prefer it, come back with me to my hotel, Phyllida, and let us talk matters over quietly.”

“There is nothing to talk over, sir, and there is nothing to be done. I have disgraced him without

remedy, and the sooner he and his friends forget my existence the better."

"But I am of a different opinion. I have been talking with Jack Neville since I was at Briarwood. Do you know, by the way, that your old friend Jack is in town?"

Phyllida slightly shuddered.

"No, Mr. Cole, I had not heard it before; but I would rather not see him. He will remind me of the past."

"I had no intention of proposing it, only I found out from what he told me that I had been acquainted with your mother, Mrs. Moss (as she called herself), and you are very like her, Phyllida—very like. I know now what it is in your face that attracted me from the first."

But to Phyllida it was evidently a matter of complete indifference whether Mr. Cole was attracted by her or not. She moved uneasily from his side, trying to elude him.

"Will you let me pass into the office, Mr. Cole? I have business here."

"What is your business? To insert an advertisement in the *Standard*? Don't throw away your

money, Phyllida; you must have little enough, because I tell you it will be useless."

She looked at him in astonishment.

"How can you know what my advertisement is about?"

"I don't know the words of it, but I am sure of the substance. It is to entreat your cousin, Mrs. Penfold, not to let Bernard Freshfield put the detectives on your track, and I can help you in that matter better than twenty Mrs. Penfolds."

"How can you do so?" she asked faintly.

"Because Bernard will not act without consulting me, in fact the business will be put into my hands to work as I choose. Now, Phyllida, I will make a compact with you. Come home with me and let us talk quietly over the matter, and I promise Bernard shall not have your address until you give it him yourself. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes, I will go with you," she said; for she was dying to hear all about her husband, and how he had borne the revelations which had been made to him.

She stood quietly enough by Cole's side until he had hailed a cab and placed her in it; but as

soon as they were driving towards his hotel, she startled him by hiding her face upon his arm and bursting into a flood of tears.

"Oh, Mr. Cole," she sobbed, "I don't bear you any enmity—indeed I don't—for I know it was your duty to tell him; and it was to my shame that he should have been kept in ignorance so long. But my heart is breaking—indeed—indeed it is!"

"Hush, Phyllida! Hush, my child," he found himself saying, in the most paternal manner, as he smoothed the long tresses which had fallen from under her hat.

"I did not dream I was doing him an injury," she went on, weeping; "how should I? I didn't know that *anybody* considered a divorce illegal. And, Mr. Cole, I was never really married to that other man; for I ran away from him the very same day that my father forced me into it, and hid in a digger's hut until Cortès had left the valley. So I believed I was quite—*quite* free—to do as I chose."

"Yes, yes; I understand it all now," replied Cole soothingly; "and so will he, some day. I will take care that he does. But you must try and compose yourself, Phyllida, for here we are, close to my hotel,

and you would not like the waiters to see you in this condition."

She drew herself up then, and dried her tears, and pulled her veil over her face, and walked up to his private sitting-room with a dignity of which he had hardly thought her capable; and Jack Neville's assertion that "Nessie always looked like a lady" came back to his mind as he watched her.

"And now," he commenced, when they had seated themselves, "tell me first what you intend to do."

"I am going back to the stage, Mr. Cole. I find my style of acting is all the rage in London just now, and I have already had a very favourable interview with one of the managers."

"Yes, I suppose you will get an engagement, Stephanie, if it is only for your beauty. But of course, then, you have relinquished all idea of returning to Bernard Freshfield?"

She gave a sudden cry, and put up her hand to her face.

"Oh, Mr. Cole, don't! You know that he would not take me back."

"I am not so sure of it. He is very much

attached to you, and I believe he would be ready to condone everything if you wished to return."

"Oh, I couldn't—I couldn't! He may think so now in the first agony of parting; but he would say differently when we had settled down into a quiet life again. Think what I have done to him—he who is so good, so pure, so pious, so fond of his mother and sister, so anxious to do honour to his profession. I went amongst them all as his wife; I took all the privileges of a wife, and the respect and esteem. And what has it ended in? That he doesn't believe me to have been free till Cortès died, and that for six months I betrayed him (by my cowardice in not telling the truth) into the commission of a sin for which he must look on me with abhorrence, I—I—who would have died for him," she continued, with a fresh burst of grief.

"Listen to me, my dear," replied Cole, "all that you say is very true, and had you *not* believed yourself to be free, and deceived him into thinking you so, I daresay this would have been an awkward matter to mend. But I have talked with poor Bernard on the subject, and however grieved he

may be (and he has been terribly cut up about it), he absolves you from blame in the matter."

"He *absolves* me!" she repeated with surprise. "Does that mean he thinks I was right?"

"Not quite that, Phyllida. He regrets deeply that you were not more open with him, but he does not consider the injury has been so great as to prevent your living together again. Bernard wants you to return to him."

A gleam of joy shot over her countenance, but it was immediately succeeded by her former gloom.

"He is wrong," she answered, "even to wish it. Nothing can unmake me. I was never fit to become one of his family; and on looking back, I think I was mad ever to think of it."

"But if your husband desires you to return, it becomes your duty to do so."

"He is not my husband," replied Phyllida.

"My dear, I think that question is open to doubt. If your divorce was a legal one, he is at any rate your husband by law."

"*My husband by law,*" she echoed; "oh, Mr. Cole, you don't know Bernard if you can speak of him like that; you don't know what Bernard can

make a woman feel a husband to be, if you can name the name in the same breath as *law*. Do you imagine I could endure to know myself to be his wife *by law*, and miss all the holiness and sanctity which made the title sound like a blessing to me every time he uttered it? Do you think I could accept what the law would give me, and know that the esteem and love which he showered on me (but which I had no right to take from him) were dead and gone for ever?"

"Perhaps not; but supposing they are not dead?"

"I should bring him to shame all the same. I should cause him to be pitied by his neighbours and avoided by his relations. Fancy a parson with a wife whose antecedents must not be inquired into. Oh, Mr. Cole, do not let him find me out; persuade him to leave me alone. He shall never be troubled again by so much as the mention of my name, for I will not let people know that we have ever met."

"I don't think Bernard will consent to that," replied Cole gravely. He was beginning to fear that the task he had taken on himself would prove a less easy one than he had imagined.

"But he must—he must!" cried Phyllida wildly. "I will not meet him; I will not speak to him. I have been a curse upon his life, and if my heart breaks under the ordeal, I will separate myself from him for ever; and were I to see him come into this room this very moment, I would— Ah!—"

But at this juncture Phyllida turned, and seeing Bernard himself standing on the threshold, gave a shriek of joy and flew into his arms.

"Hang you, Bernard!" cried Nelson Cole, with affected anger, "I thought I desired you to remain in your own rooms until I requested the pleasure of your company here."

But he might have talked for ever before the lovers would have heard a word of what he said.

"Forgive me, love, forgive me!" Phyllida was crying, as, having slid from Bernard's arms, she fell at his feet, and twisted herself like a snake about his knees; "I did not know what I was doing; I never thought that I was injuring you; I saw only one thing, and that was my love, which would have led me to die for you if my death could have done you any good. Oh, say you forgive me—you who first taught me that there is forgiveness for the worst

of sinners—say that you do not believe that I wilfully deceived you—that you will not curse me for having blighted all your hopes in life?”

“I will say nothing, my Phyllida,” returned Bernard, as he attempted to raise her from the ground, “until you come to my heart—to your rightful resting-place—and tell me what you wish from there.”

“Oh, Bernard, I am not worthy.”

“If you are not worthy, no woman is. It is your home, dearest, by the rights of our mutual love, and until you come home, I will not speak to you.”

Then she suffered him to lift her drooping form, and clasp it in his arms, and their lips met, as if there had been no stain between them, and she had been the daughter of a duke instead of a disreputable gold digger, who kept a gaming-table in the Valley of Sacramento.

“You know all—*all*,” she whispered.

“All, dearest, except one thing which I wait to learn from your own lips. There has been an irregularity in our marriage, Phyllida. Will you marry me over again?”

"*Over again?*" she repeated, startled at the idea of so much happiness.

"Yes, over again. You are free now, by the universal Law of Death—and as a free woman, I offer you my hand. Will you accept it, Phyllida?"

"Oh, Mr. Cole," she exclaimed, turning to their mutual friend, "tell Bernard this must not be. Tell him of what we were talking before he came in."

"Well, my dear, I don't know of what you *were* talking, unless it was of your determination never to see nor speak to him again. And if you are going to keep your other resolutions as well as you did *that* one, why, I don't think you require any interference on my part."

She reddened and was silent.

"Phyllida," said Bernard, "we don't want Nelson Cole nor any one else to settle our affairs for us. You are my wife, darling—I can never regard you in any other light—and if you won't come back to me, I shall have to walk through life alone, for I certainly should never think myself justified in marrying any one else."

"There now, you see," interposed Cole, "if you don't marry him, Phyllida, you'll have another set

of sins upon your head, and by your own account you can't afford that."

"But your mother and Laura?" said Phyllida timidly to Bernard.

"Laura is only too anxious to see us re-united, darling,—and as for my mother,—well, she *is* my mother, and not my wife."

"But the Bluemere people?" continued the girl with a shudder.

"I shall not take you back to Bluemere, or at all events not for some time. We will have a holiday first, and enjoy some travelling together."

"Come over the duck pond with me," said Cole; "there's lots of sight-seeing for you in the States."

"Done with you!" exclaimed Bernard heartily. "If Phyllida agrees, so do I. And now, my love, when is this marriage to be?"

"When you like, dear Bernard."

"I should *like* to-day, but as I suppose it's too late, I like to-morrow. I have a brother parson close at hand to whom I will explain matters, and he will do it as privately for us as possible. You will come with us, Cole?"

"Oh yes," returned Cole gruffly; "as I was the

cause of the split, I should like to see the knot tied again, and give the bride away. And don't you think it would be kind to telegraph the intelligence to Mrs. Penfold and ask her and the old captain she writes about to join us at luncheon afterwards."

"Oh, yes; let us have cousin Penfold, by all means," said Bernard. "I owe the old lady another sealskin cloak for the rapidity with which she advertised for my darling."

"And now, Phyllida," said Nelson Cole, "I had better see you home, and Bernard can let you know the time and place for to-morrow's meeting by this evening's post."

"Oh, can't she stay the evening, and dine with us?" asked Bernard, in a tone of injury.

"No; she is tired out with all this excitement; she will be much better at home."

"Let me go with her, then," replied the other eagerly.

"You will do no such thing; I shall take her myself," was the curt rejoinder; and Nelson Cole began to hurry Phyllida from the room.

She flung herself once more into her husband's

arms, and then turning to Cole, she caught his hand and timidly raised it to her lips.

"How can I ever thank you," she murmured, "for bringing me home again?"

"Won't you give him a better one than that, Phyllida?—he deserves it," said Bernard, laughing.

The girl raised her head, and kissed Cole upon the forehead; and as he felt the touch of her lips, the blood mounted to his face as if he had been a boy.

"Fancy, a kiss from Agnes's child making me feel like that!" he grumbled to himself in a cynical manner, as he hurried after her down to the cab which was waiting to convey them to her home. He was ready to laugh at himself for his weakness, and yet the remembrance of Phyllida's kiss was with him through his dreams.

The next morning was as bright as the season could contrive to make it, and the three people who went to church so early, and returned to the hotel in time to greet Mrs. Penfold and Captain Barclay on their arrival from Gatehead, could not have looked brighter had it been a morning in the leafy June.

"Not in black *this* time, my dear," whispered

Mrs. Penfold approvingly, when the gentlemen had taken possession of the nice, bluff old captain, and she had a moment alone with Phyllida.

“Oh no, cousin Penfold,” replied the girl, smiling, as she contemplated her soft grey velvet dress. “Dear Bernie telegraphed yesterday for Mrs. Garnett to send up some of my things. He said we wouldn’t have any mistake *this* time. Oh! he is so good to me, and after all that I have done. I feel so happy, cousin—just as if it was too much to bear, and I must die.”

“Oh no, my dear, you mustn’t say that,” replied Mrs. Penfold, who took everything she heard *au pied de la lettre*. “Mr. Freshfield was good enough to write and tell me all about you, and though I don’t say you ought not to have told us of your former marriage, yet it’s all over now, thank Heaven! and certainly no one has a better right to Mr. Freshfield than yourself. Ah, all marriages have their twofold aspects, and you have found out the truth already. Well, well,” and Mrs. Penfold sighed in a mysterious manner, which seemed to say, “Do ask me a little more about it.”

Phyllida took the hint.

"What is it, dear cousin? *Your* marriage was happy enough, I know, for you have often told me so."

"Yes, my dear, so long as it lasted," replied Mrs. Penfold, still mysteriously.

"You would like it to come over again?" said Phyllida sympathisingly, and with a happy glance at her Bernard.

"I should indeed, my dear; but what would people say? I shall be fifty-two next birthday, remember."

"Dear cousin, what *do* you mean?"

"Why, my dear, I thought you would have guessed it, from his interest in you and so forth. Captain Barclay, a thorough gentleman, Royal Navy, you know, Phyllida—none of your merchant services, my dear; but, then, as I tell him, 'Captain, what *would* the world say?'"

A light broke in on Phyllida.

"Is it true? Oh, I *am* glad! Never mind *the world*, cousin Penfold. Think of yourselves, and what your *hearts* say; that is the only thing worth a moment's consideration. Take a lesson from my Bernard. You see how little he cares for the world; and he is so good—so perfect. And a true marriage

is such a holy thing. Oh, I think you will be very happy with the dear old captain, and I am sure that he is nice."

"Ah, he *is* that, my dear—essentially nice, and has become so used to my ways that he cannot eat his dinner unless I cook it, nor sleep at night unless I make his bed. So I hope I shall make him comfortable in his last days; and our little incomes put together will enable us to keep the house entirely for ourselves. I shall not dare tell my sister Charlotte until it is all over; but I felt I should like to hear you say, Phyllida, that you consider the plan a good one."

"I consider it the very best plan in all the world," cried Phyllida heartily; but as she spoke the door was flung open, and before the waiter could announce the coming visitors, she found herself clasped in Laura's arms.

"Phyllida, my dear, *dear* sister. My darling Phyllida, have you really come home again?" exclaimed Laura in an outburst of affection and kisses, as she strained her sister-in-law to her heart.

"Yes, yes, I am home for ever now," returned Phyllida; "we have just come back from church.

We have been married again this morning;" and the two girls cried together for joy.

"But please to explain your presence here," said Bernard, when the excitement had somewhat subsided. "We are delighted, Laurie, to welcome you and dear old Anderson to our wedding-breakfast, but I confess I should like to understand why you two giddy young creatures are running about London together, and what brought you up from Blue-mere on this particular day?"

"Why, where are mamma and the Muckheeps?" exclaimed Laura suddenly, looking round for them.

"We have not seen them. Did you expect to meet them here?" replied her brother.

"They started for London an hour before we did, that is what made Charlie bring me up to you, Bernard, because we feared—we were not quite sure, that is to say, how you would like the intrusion of strangers at such a time. Where *can* they be? I am astonished they have not yet arrived. They must have mistaken the hotel."

At the idea of her mother-in-law's appearance, Phyllida turned pale and crept to her husband's side. Bernard put his arm firmly round her.

“Never mind,” he said cheerfully, “we are not going to wait luncheon for them, I can answer for that, for I ate no breakfast this morning, and am as hungry as a hunter. So, my dear friends, will you take your places—(ah! Charlie, how good it is to see *your* face here, my boy)—and join my heart in its thanksgiving for the very happiest meal I’ve ever sat down to.”

The waiters, who had been busy spreading the table whilst this conversation was carried on, now announced that all was ready, and the party sat down to luncheon. How merry they were; and yet not so merry perhaps as cheerful, for though Laura blushed and giggled a good deal, remembering the scene that had taken place at Blue Mount that morning, and Mrs. Penfold simpered in a matronly way under the attentions of Captain Barclay, Phyllida’s sweet face turned paler and paler as the moments went on, and each one brought nearer to her the dreaded advent of Mrs. Freshfield; and Bernard also, although he felt brave as a lion in defence of his young wife, wished heartily that the anticipation of the interview had not spoiled their luncheon. At last, however, as the meal had nearly

drawn to a conclusion, it came. A querulous voice was heard approaching by the vast staircases of the hotel that led to their apartments, and Laura and Bernard simultaneously exclaimed, "My mother!" The waiter in attendance heard them, and threw open the door, and Mrs. Freshfield appeared first upon the threshold, transfixed at the scene that met her view.

"What is this?" she exclaimed angrily, as her eyes rapidly took in the presence of Laura and Mr. Anderson and the rest of the wedding guests.

"*This*, mother," replied Bernard, as, holding his wife's hand firmly in his own, he rose to his feet to confront her, "is my wedding breakfast; Phyllida and I have been married again this morning."

"*Married again!*" gasped Mrs. Freshfield, "and when I have travelled all this distance at *my* age to try and save you from being once more shackled with the chains of ungodliness; when I and my dear saintly friends, the Laird o' Muckheep and his blessed sister, have hastened here at the call of duty to try and snatch you as a brand from the burning, to find you once more in the power of Satan, is indeed too hard."

"Hadn't you better have some luncheon, now you are here?" replied her son practically.

"Hoot, Mrs. Fraich-field," exclaimed the voice of Miss Janet, somewhere from the background, "didna I tell ye it was rai-sh to leave Bluemere without the wree-teen dirairc-tions in your han' o' the hoose wheer yon misguided young mon had heeden himsel'. If ye had taken my advice, ye woudna ha' dree-ven my brither an' mysel' round Loon-don for mair than twa hoors whiles ye tried to re-cairl the neem o' the street, an' ye wood ha' been in time, maybe, to raiss-cue heem fra' the weels o' the evil one."

"Mother," said Bernard, "if you and your friends like to take your places amongst us *as* friends, we shall be glad to see you; but if you have journeyed to town for the express purpose of insulting me and my wife, the sooner you go back to Bluemere the better."

"Oh, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Freshfield, turning to some one who stood behind her, "can *you* not say a word in season to my unhappy son?"

"Ay," replied the voice of the Laird o' Muck-heep, "when I can *see* him, madam, mebbe I shall

be tauld the reet thing to say to tooch his hairt; but at this moment, Mrs. Fraich-field, it's naething I *can* see but the toop o' your ane boonet."

"I beg you ten thousand pardons," said Mrs. Freshfield, as she made way for the laird to appear upon the threshold; "in my terrible grief and disappointment I could think of nothing but myself."

But at the sound of the laird's voice, Phyllida had risen suddenly to her feet and clung to her husband, almost convulsively.

"What is it, my darling? What do you fear?" Bernard was saying tenderly, when his mother's saintly friend came to the front.

"See, see!" shrieked Phyllida, as she pointed to him; "I knew it was he. I recognised him from his voice. There stands *my father*."

She did not hide her face, but she pressed it close against her husband's breast, whilst her eyes glowed like living coals, and every feature was expressive of the keenest horror.

"*Your father!*" repeated Bernard. But by this time a fearful oath had rung through the room—such an oath as comes from the lips of a man, but seldom in his lifetime—such an oath as the con-

demned felon in the dock might level at the one who had been the cause of his standing there, and it had issued from the lips of Nelson Cole.

"Sandie Macpherson, by all that's holy!" he exclaimed as he started to his feet.

The Laird o' Muckheep turned livid—the sweat started to his forehead, and his limbs shook under him. Miss Janet was the first to come to the rescue.

"Hoot, mon," she cried, "ye dinna ken wha ye speak to—Sandie Macpherson, indeed. It's my brither, the Laird o' Muckheep, wha stan's befor ye; a mon wha has spended his life in bringing back lairst sools to the ane foold. What wood ye ha' in callin' the laird by sic a neem as that?"

"The Laird of Muckheep?" cried Phyllida; "it is not true. His name is Macpherson, and he is the greatest enemy I ever had. There stands the man, and let him look me in the eyes and deny it if he dare, who forced me to marry his colleague Fernan Cortès, for fear I should betray the murder I saw them commit between them."

At the word "*murder*," which sends a thrill through every breast, the luncheon party rose to

their feet simultaneously, and shrank in horror from the man who stood in their midst.

"Ye boold-faced hizzy," interposed Miss Janet, "to ca' the Laird o' Muckheep out o' his ain respected name."

"I don't know what his own name may be," continued Phyllida, "for he has had a dozen names to my knowledge, but he knows that what I say is true. He knows that I saw him hold Norris the Englishman down by the arms, whilst Cortès stabbed him in the back with his bowie-knife, and that when I threatened to expose his villainy, he locked me up in a room until he brought a man to marry me to Cortès, and that he had to hold me himself whilst the vile ceremony was performed. Answer me, Macpherson," cried the girl, with eyes of fire, "Is it not the truth that I am telling now?"

"Phyllida, he is too much of a cur to do you justice," exclaimed Nelson Cole; "it is a man alone who ought to deal with him, and it is a man who will bring him to his knees. Do you know *me*, Sandie Macpherson?" he said in a voice of thunder, as he strode up to the quondam gold-digger of

Sacramento Valley, and glared in his face, "Do you know *me*—*Nelson Cole*? Answer that."

Macpherson glanced round the room once or twice uneasily, and then made a bolt for the door. But Cole had already pinioned his arms from behind.

"No, my friend," he said, shaking his head over him, "you don't leave us just yet, not till I've finished with you at all events; and if you attempt any violence I will hand you over at once to the police. I repeat my question, Do you know me?"

"Of course I know you," replied Macpherson sullenly.

"Of course you know me, and I will tell this company why. Nineteen years ago, ladies and gentlemen, this brute, writhing in my grasp here, who has come to England with a shorn face to profess piety, ran away with my wife, Agnes Summers, whom I had married in St. Domingo the year before."

"My mother!" exclaimed Phyllida.

"Yes, child, your unhappy mother, who appears to have expiated her error by a life of suffering. Thank God she is at rest! but you have still to answer to me, Sandie Macpherson, for the wrong you did her. I have tracked you round and round the

States for this alone; I have watched and waited for you in vain; and now that you've dropped into my mouth like a ripe plum at the time I least expected it, you needn't think that I will let you go without the punishment I have thirsted to give you."

"Oh, this must be some dreadful mistake," said Mrs. Freshfield, sinking into a chair, with her handkerchief to her eyes, "to talk of crime and punishment in connection with a saint like the Laird o' Muckheep, and one whose whole life has been spent in doing good."

"Ech! but these carles 'ull discover theer mistake before lang, Mrs. Fraich-field; an' it's a teerible peenalty they'll ha' to pee foor layin' veeolent hans upon the sacred pair-son o' a Muckheep."

"Oh no, madam, do not flatter yourself with such a false idea," said Phyllida. "*Who* should know better than myself what that miserable man is? *I* who have the misfortune to call him '*father*.' He killed my mother by a long course of cruelty and violence. He sacrificed *me*, his only child, to a man as wicked as himself to conceal his own crime."

"You're no bairn o' mine," interrupted Macpherson with a scowl. "Ay, Mr. Cole, but ye needna

glare at me after sic a fashion. Ye maun do what ye like wi' me noo; I've had my revenge on ye befoor-hand. Ye didna lose anely your wife by my means, for she brought your bairn along wi' her, and for sixteen years she leaved as my ain dairghter in the Sacramento Valley, and there's many to testify to the truth o' that."

"*Brute!*" exclaimed Cole, as he nearly shook the life out of him. "Villain, devil! Was it not sufficient to rob me of one Agnes at a time?"

"*Not* his child!" cried Phyllida, in a transport of delight. "Oh, there may be some chance of my redeeming the past yet. *Not* belong to that vile, wicked man! Bernard, kiss me. I shall be a better woman than I ever hoped to be."

"What wood ye be doin' by me?" demanded Macpherson, as Nelson Cole administered a tremendous kick to his person.

"What would I be doing by you?" he repeated scornfully. "Why, I would like to treat you as you treated her—to take your life from you, drop by drop, and see you die by inches in silent, hopeless agony. But you are a brute, and I am a man, and I will not forget that you have restored to me my child."

"Speer me!" said Macpherson, shivering on his knees.

"Spare you? Did you spare my wife? Have you spared my daughter? For what reason should I spare you?"

"But she wasna' meeried to Cortès—it was no a pair-son that I brought to per-fairm the cereemony. It was joist a tree-ck I played to prevent the gairl fra splee-tin' on us. And noo I ha' tauld ye that, and ane gude tairn desairves anither."

"Not a parson!" repeated Phyllida, "not married to Cortès! and I ran away from him the very same day. Oh! Bernard, I am indeed your own. How mercifully I have been preserved for you."

"I will let you go, then," said Nelson Cole, addressing Macpherson, "but not to pollute this country with your presence. Leave England, and never show your ugly face in it again, or I will make the place too hot to hold you."

"But ye ha' nae proofs—ye canna hand me ower to the police," said Macpherson anxiously.

"I can make the country ring with your story though, until you are hounded like a leper from the presence of every honest man. And I will do it,

excepting on that one condition. Do you understand me?"

"I do."

"Go, then, and take your sister with you. We wish no remembrance left behind of the injury you have caused so many here."

He loosed the creature with a parting shake as he spoke, and Miss Janet, taking her cue from her brother's demeanour, slunk after the Laird o' Muck-heep from the room. Then there was a silence, broken only by the weeping of Mrs. Freshfield—for every one felt that the next words would be sacred. And so they rung out, like a clarion peal from heaven upon the happy air,—

"Father!"

"My own, own child."

And Bernard took his wife and placed her in the arms of Nelson Cole.

THE END.

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